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# The Religion of Consumption and Christian Neighbor Love

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

THE RELIGION OF CONSUMPTION AND CHRISTIAN  
NEIGHBOR LOVE

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO  
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL  
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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN THEOLOGY

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## ABSTRACT

Consumerism is a word frequently used in various disciplines to express the variety of attitudes, motivations, and practices found among the middle and upper classes. It drives the global economy and influences individuals' socio-psychological perceptions. Some have gone so far as to call consumerism a religion, yet they have not substantiated this claim. This dissertation offers a framework that accounts for consumerism as a religion both as a person's ultimate concern and as a structuralized belief system. As such, it prescribes moral values that shape how people respond to the world around them, particularly with regard to notions of person, society, and the environment. Comparing these same categories to Christian neighbor love, I argue that the two ethics are in opposition to one another.



## INTRODUCTION

Consumption is necessary. From the moment life began, biological creatures have been required to consume in order to sustain their existence. Mammals need oxygen to breathe, plants use nutrients from the soil, and all living things must have food and water to grow and flourish. The survival of every species obligates it to utilize the planet and its resources to live. Consuming is endemic to corporeal beings; however, humanity has transformed the natural act of consumption into a means of striving after goals other than physical survival.

In this study, consumerism is the term used to describe consumptive practices aimed at achieving some telos beyond physical survival. Within consumerism, individuals' foremost animating rationale becomes the desire to actualize life through the buying and using of goods. This is not a new phenomenon, especially in Europe and North America. People seek ecological, educational, political, and emotional ends through their consumptive practices. Yet, there is a growing belief that individuals are using their consumption in a new way. They are merging consumerism and religion to attend to their spiritual lives.

This has led some theologians and moral philosophers to label consumerism a religion. This adds another dimension to discussions regarding what consumerism is and how it impacts life. It suggests that consumerism is more than an economic boon that generates jobs or displays social standing. When consumerism is designated a religion, it

denotes that consumption is a way for people to express their faith and devotion. This ties human consumption to notions of the sacred.

Connecting consumerism and religion has implications for both society and the individual. If consumerism is a religion, then it proposes claims about reality that compete with other religions. As a religion, consumerism informs people how they ought to live. There is a code of conduct that establishes right and wrong behaviors and impacts how adherents relate to others. Also, religions are communal. As people negotiate between keeping faith in the reality claims of consumerism and how their devotion affects their interactions with others in society, their religious community helps them reconcile the sacred and the secular. Consumerism as a religion creates another morality and confers spiritual significance upon people's consumption.

However, simply positing that consumerism is a religion does not make it so. How might this claim be validated? And if consumerism is indeed found to be a religion, what are the ramifications and responses for the Christian? This dissertation responds to these questions with the claim that consumerism is a religion, and as a religion, it contrasts with Christianity.

Chapter one provides the rationale for identifying consumerism as a religion and examines consumerism within the economic and socio-psychological spheres. People use consumerism in distinctive ways within each of these realms, yet consumerism also links them together thereby permeating multiple facets of life.

Chapter two details Ninian Smart's delineational methodology, which includes seven phenomena common to religions. The chapter concludes by considering

consumerism in light of Smart's experiential, material, narrative, ritual, social, doctrinal, and ethical dimensions.

Chapter three addresses the ethical dimension of consumerism, identifying it as self-defined happiness through consuming. The chapter examines the impact of this ethic on notions of person, society, and the environment.

Chapter four offers the Christian ethic of neighbor love as a contrast to the ethic of consumerism. Using the categories of person, society, and the environment from chapter three, the morality of loving one's neighbor is shown to be antithetical to the morality of self-defined happiness through consuming.

There are some caveats that should be mentioned before beginning. First, consumerism is not a monolithic concept. As this introduction has begun to show, consumerism is used in conjunction with various other fields (economics, sociology, politics, business, ecology, etc.), and there are other ethical perspectives beyond what I offer here. The diverse ways people employ consumerism attest to its ubiquity in life. It affects multiple spheres of life and encourages people toward a particular consumptive pattern. While individuals understand and express consumerism differently, it remains an influencing force that shapes society through its broad reach into virtually every aspect of life.

Second, this study focuses on consumerism as it relates to religion. While this discussion includes identifying consumerism within the fields of economics, sociology, and ecology, they are not crux of this study. These different fields highlight various aspects of consumerism that help clarify what it is and how it functions within society. However, these are important only insofar as they help foster the analysis of

consumerism as a religion. Where such fields overlap with this goal, they are explored. When economics, sociology, and ecology no longer attend to this understanding of consumerism, they are put aside and left for other studies to examine.

Finally, regardless of how much one might try, every written work is influenced by the author's own experiences and communities. The questions writers ask, the assumptions they make, and the sources from which they draw all shape the form and content of their work. Much of what is written here reflects my own views toward Evangelical Christianity which I embrace or critique. For example, in my tradition, scripture receives prominence as the theological and ethical source of knowledge over reason, tradition, or experience. While these other sources are important and contribute to human knowledge, the Bible is paramount in my approach. Also, this study gives much attention to economics and ecology, in part because I believe Evangelicals acquiesce to and ignore the influence of consumerism as a religion in these two areas, respectively. This said, my hope is that the information and research presented here is nevertheless beneficial to anyone examining consumerism from a religious perspective.

CHAPTER ONE

A FRAMEWORK FOR UNDERSTANDING CONSUMERISM:  
ECONOMICS, SOCIOLOGY, AND RELIGION

The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country.... In place of the old wants, satisfied by the production of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. —Karl Marx<sup>1</sup>

Consumerism is an enigma; it expresses distinct paradigms for various groups of people culminating in differing responses. Theologians decry it as the quintessential expression of over-indulgence and selfishness, behaviors and attitudes deemed diametrically opposed to a life of righteousness. Environmentalists protest against the toll human over-consumption has on the planet by way of destruction of ecological habitats and pollution. Advertisers promote consumerism as the pathway to individuality and respectability. Politicians regard consumerism as the handmaiden of liberty because of the freedom it creates. Economists herald the merits of consumerism as the channel for creating wealth and improving standards of living. People draw on consumerism to promote each of these attributes, making it challenging to present a single, all-encompassing definition.

While difficult to define precisely, consumerism in this study will mean those

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: International Publishers, 2004), 12-13.

habituated consumptive practices of human beings that aim to achieve some religious, sociological, and/or economical telos. This definition of consumerism is more than a descriptor for any good or product that goes beyond the requirements necessary for basic survival. Consumerism is the name for those acts which use goods and products in order to give value and reason to people's lives. It describes both the attitude and motivation for human buying and consuming. Participating in consumerism frequently leads to excessive consumption, though overabundance is not a necessary aspect of its definition. Individuals and groups may lack the available resources to fulfill all of their material desires, yet still participate in consumerism. On the other hand, buying amenities does not automatically place a person within this description of consumerism.

This chapter examines how consumerism fits within the spheres of economics, social standing, and religion, spheres that contribute to the meaning and sense of worth of human life. To better understand consumerism in relationship to these categories, key thinkers from each of these fields will provide the framework. The first section analyzes how consumerism integrates with and sustains the economic approach inspired by Adam Smith. According to this model, expanding the consumer base is crucial for the economic growth that improves people's quality of life. Next, Thorstein Veblen's *Theory of the Leisure Class* provides a socio-psychological approach for explaining consumerism; the goods and services individuals procure demonstrate these individuals' status and associations in society. Lastly, this chapter adopts Paul Tillich's notion of "ultimate concern" to address the rising trend of identifying consumerism as a religion.

### **Consumerism and Its Role in Economic Theory**

Economists, politicians, and workers all tend to insist on the need for continual

consumption; however, it is important to examine the connection between consumption and economics in order to avoid conflating consumerism and capitalism. Consumerism and capitalism demonstrate a harmonious symbiosis, but they stand as distinct systems that require analysis. From the individual's perspective, the economic *raison d'être* within consumerism is to help generate money in order to satisfy a desire or need for material goods and services through exchanges based on currency. This rationale is not limited to free market capitalism, though no other economic model has been so amenable to producing wealth for so many for this purpose.<sup>2</sup> Consumerism provides an explanation of people's fiscal decisions; capitalism is just one approach for conveying those decisions. This distinction is important so as to not confuse the purpose of economics with the methods used.

Adam Smith provides a helpful starting point for exploring the relationship between consumerism and economics. His free-market theory has led to today's *laissez faire* monetary policies.<sup>3</sup> Economists continue to uphold his notions of self-interest and limited government involvement in commerce.<sup>4</sup> He gives great attention to how consumers affect the economy and its reciprocal influence upon them, and he apprehends

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<sup>2</sup> For examples of other economic systems that people and communities have used in their endeavor to achieve material goods, see Greg Castillo, "Domesticating the Cold War," *Journal of Contemporary History* 40, no. 2 (2005): 261-288 with regard to consumerism and socialism and communism. For such desires within mercantilism, see Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (Buffalo, New York: Prometheus Books, 1991); Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels with regard to feudalism in *Capital, Volume 1* (New York: International Publishers, 1984); and Thorstein Veblen in capitalism in *The Theory of the Leisure Class* (New York: Dover, 1994).

<sup>3</sup> Robert Heilbroner, *The Worldly Philosophers*, 7th ed. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 68.

<sup>4</sup> According to Smith, "[i]t is not from the benevolence of the butcher, the brewer, or the baker, that we expect our dinner, but from their regard to their own interest. We address ourselves, not to their humanity, but to their self-love, and never talk to them of our own necessities, but of their advantages." Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 20. Similarly, he suggests that the post office "is, perhaps, the only mercantile project which has been successfully managed by...every government... Princes, however, have frequently engaged in many other mercantile projects...They have scarce ever succeeded...No two characters seem more inconsistent than those of trader and sovereign." Ibid., 490.

the difference and compatibility between consumerism and capitalism. The core of Smith's theory is that production necessitates consumption, and consumption expresses liberty. Consumerism portends wealth for those nations who employ this economic structure as well as for many of the individuals who are able to participate in it. It also promotes individual autonomy by expanding the choices people have among the various global products that exist in the market. For modern consumerist thinking, Smith's dual axes of the accumulation of capital and personal liberty provide the bond between the value and purpose of life and the economic sector.

Adam Smith develops his ideas on wealth generation through his critique of eighteenth century British mercantile policies. In *Wealth of Nations*, Smith shows the deficiencies of the mercantile system with its monopolies, guilds, limited views on what constitutes wealth (i.e., gold and silver), and its heavy restrictions on competitive trade. He contends that mercantilism succeeded in providing slightly more wealth than the feudal system, but it still restrained Britain from obtaining "real wealth and greatness." He looks to the American colonies as an example of a different economic system that encourages capital growth and the amassing of riches. If the colonies were subjected to the British mercantile system, Smith is confident all of their wealth would quickly fade:

Were the Americans, either by combination, or by any other sort of violence, to stop the importation of European manufactures, and, by thus giving a monopoly to such of their own countrymen as could manufacture the like goods, divert any considerable part of their capital into this employment, they would retard, instead of accelerating, the further increase in the value of their annual produce, and would obstruct, instead of promoting, the progress of their country towards real wealth and greatness.<sup>5</sup>

Mercantilism not only hinders a nation's accumulation of wealth, but also continues an

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 309.



inferior political order where power lies in the hands of the wealthy few. Here, the masses remain dependent upon the former's benevolence rather than capable of expressing their own personal liberties.

Smith presents a new model which expands the importance of consumption in order to develop a nation economically. He advocates for a "commercial society" as the best means of raising the living standards of the entire populace.<sup>6</sup> Permitting the butcher, the brewer, the baker, and other members of the community to exchange their production surplus in order to obtain greater wants and needs motivates each of them to work harder. It also allows them to decide between various products of differing qualities and seek out the most competitive prices. The liberty to buy a producer's abundance "is the sole end and purpose of all production; and the interest of the producer ought to be attended to, only so far as it may be necessary for promoting that of the consumer. The maxim is so perfectly self-evident, that it would be absurd to attempt to prove it."<sup>7</sup> For Smith, commercial society righted the existing economic inversion that favored the producer over the consumer. Consumption is the best engine to drive the economy:

by opening a more extensive market for whatever part of the produce of [an industry's] labour may exceed the home consumption, it encourages [the manufacturer] to improve its productive power, and to augment its annual produce to the utmost, and thereby to increase the real revenue and wealth of the society.<sup>8</sup>

There is a freedom that takes place when the consumer receives priority over the

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<sup>6</sup> For a clear and concise account of Adam Smith's praises and concerns for "commercial society"—a phrase by which he intended a form of capitalism rather than mercantilism—see Dennis C. Rasmussen, *Problems and Promise of Commercial Society* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 444.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 342.

producer. This is observable in the various options that people encounter on a daily basis.

Steven Waldman illustrates how this type of personal liberty has increased through the growing number of consumer decision-making opportunities over the past several decades: “A typical supermarket in 1976 had 9,000 products; today [1992] it has more than 30,000.... The median household got six TV stations in 1975. Thanks to deregulation of the cable TV industry, that family now has more than thirty channels.”<sup>9</sup>

People within consumer society have gained an even greater freedom of choice throughout the last twenty years. In 2010, supermarkets carried an average of 38,718 items,<sup>10</sup> and in 2008, “the average US household had 130 TV channels available to it.”<sup>11</sup>

The freedom that consumerism offers is deeper than a simple choice of taste or preference; it permits those involved to determine and undertake plans for living life however they see most appropriate. According to Smith, nature endows humanity with a liberty that allows people the right to choose their employment as well as the products they want to buy. The freedom Smith discusses is not democratic independence, but a natural liberty Patricia Werhane identifies as “personal and economic liberty, the liberty to conduct one’s personal affairs.... He had little faith in commoners’ abilities to govern themselves or to make sound political judgments.”<sup>12</sup> For Adam Smith, the ability to consume—not politics—embodies humanity’s natural liberty.

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<sup>9</sup> Steven Waldman, “The Tyranny of Choice,” in *Consumer Society in American History*, ed. Lawrence B. Glickman (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 360.

<sup>10</sup> Food Marketing Institute, “Supermarket Facts: Industry Overview 2011-2012,” [http://www.fmi.org/facts\\_figs/?fuseaction=superfact](http://www.fmi.org/facts_figs/?fuseaction=superfact) (accessed July 5, 2013).

<sup>11</sup> Joe Mandese, “Nielsen Turns the ‘Channel’ Off, Permanently,” *Media Daily News*, April 29, 2010, <http://www.mediapost.com/publications/article/127158/nielsen-turns-the-channel-off-permanently.html> (accessed July 5, 2013).

<sup>12</sup> Patricia Werhane, *Adam Smith and His Legacy for Modern Capitalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 60.

Liberty to consume is a key factor in Smith's plan for increasing the standard of living for all citizens.<sup>13</sup> When services and material goods can flow through the market according to consumer demand with minimal government strictures like bounties and duties, both wealth and independence will abound. Smith sees how England's restrictive practices have hindered individual well-being and therefore pleads:

Break down the exclusive privileges of corporations, and repeal the statute of apprenticeship, both which are real encroachments upon natural liberty, and add to these the repeal of the law of settlements, so that a poor workman, when thrown out of employment either in one trade or in one place, may seek for it in another trade or in another place... and neither the public nor the individuals will suffer much more from the occasional disbanding some particular classes of manufacturers...<sup>14</sup>

Mercantilism restrains the majority of a nation's people by limiting the types of labor they may perform and the goods they have available to consume. Smith could not conceive of a society truly prospering while the government maintains policies that prevent self-interested natural liberty for the majority of its workforce.<sup>15</sup>

Few economists today conjoin wealth and liberty with consuming as Smith did, although most economists acknowledge some relationship between the two. However, history confirms what Adam Smith could only anticipate: consuming en masse via unfettered trade *does* increase the amount of overall wealth for a nation and *does* expand freedom for those able to participate in the consuming society.

The problem, according to Karl Marx, is that too few people are able to benefit

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<sup>13</sup> For Smith, "the establishment of perfect justice, of perfect liberty, and of perfect equality, is the very simple secret which most effectually secures the highest degree of prosperity to all the three classes." *Wealth of Nations*, 454.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 367-368.

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin Friedman, "Economics: A Moral Inquiry with Religious Origins," *American Economic Review* 101, no. 3 (2011): 168.

from these outcomes when a consuming society uses the capitalist system. He critiques the bourgeois and their economic system because it denies the majority of the population their due of wealth and freedom.<sup>16</sup> In contrast, “Communism deprives no man of the power to appropriate the products of society.”<sup>17</sup> He agrees with Smith that personal liberty and financial prosperity accompany one another through material consumption.

Marx understands well the role of consumption in a society’s economy and the beneficial effects it can have upon people. Using the example of the textile trade, he affirms that an increase in production and consumption results in greater wealth and liberty of sorts.

Weaving, previously done by peasants in the country as a secondary job to provide clothing, was the first labor to receive an impetus and a further development through the extension of commerce.... Beside the peasants who continued, and still continue, to weave for their own use, a new class of weavers emerged in the towns whose fabrics were destined for the entire domestic market and usually also foreign markets.<sup>18</sup>

While the context of this quote is Marx’s record of the earliest stages of the bourgeoisie’s formation, underlying it is Adam Smith’s two suppositions regarding the boon of consumption. This is not surprising. Karl Marx considered himself a champion of an economic system that encouraged wealth acquisition and personal freedom for the greater population of workers.

Marx writes passionately about how consumer economics promote prosperity. In *The Communist Manifesto* he says, “[Communists] by no means intend to abolish this personal appropriation of the products of labor, an appropriation that is made for the

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<sup>16</sup> Marx and Engels, *Manifesto*, 24.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>18</sup> Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts (Selections)” in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence Simon (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 1994), 73.

maintenance and reproduction of human life.... Accumulated labor is but a means to widen, to enrich, to promote the existence of the laborer.”<sup>19</sup> As with his illustration of the new class of weavers, Marx repeatedly focuses on the financial prosperity of the state and the individual. He writes of paid laborers, not slaves. This payment provides the resources to help secure individuals’ day-to-day living.

Marx’s theory maintains that humanity lives in a corporeal world and has needs and wants it seeks to fulfill through the act of consumption. He intends for his economic model to give every man, woman, and child the opportunity to attain their own material desires. This occurs through paid labor, a process which necessitates the buying of wares and encourages new products to be created. It generates new employment opportunities as more workers become necessary to manufacture the desired goods, resulting in more money in the economy, and thereby increasing both wages and the standard of living. Marx has no interest in stifling humanity’s material desires. Without an appetite for the novel, new employment opportunities would not occur and the nation’s wealth would stagnate. He is not criticizing the act or desire of consuming in his textile example; he assumes people are wanting and willing to purchase such goods. The practice of consumption is an integral element of even Marx’s economic theory.

Today Smith’s idea of liberty often means democracy. Individuals living under the most non-democratic governments still seek liberation through the variety of products which consumerism makes available to them. In non-capitalistic countries, people become aware of the lifestyles occurring in other parts of the world through banned media and black markets. As those citizens recognize that others live at much higher

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<sup>19</sup> Marx and Engels, *Manifesto*, 24.

standards, feelings of discontentedness and, at times, civil unrest arise. These men and women protest both their lack of freedoms and their dissatisfaction with their standards of living.<sup>20</sup> While they may or may not strive for the same levels of consumption as Europe or North America, knowing that their living conditions could be better spurs them toward demanding more for themselves.

The autonomy encouraged by consumerism extends beyond the scope of natural liberty and its effects on an individual's personal life; it translates into action toward people too disenfranchised to appeal for their own freedom. When individuals reflect on the act of consuming, they understand that buying a product infuses cash into the economic system which reaches far beyond where they have purchased it. A percentage of that money pays the wages of the salespeople, the business owners, and the workers who make the products, all of whom may live in different parts of the world. Consumers cognizant of the influence their money gives them have the ability to motivate corporations with promises to buy or threats to abstain from certain brands in what is known as "political consumerism."<sup>21</sup> Political consumerism has forced corporations with manufacturing plants around the globe to improve the working conditions for their international laborers. Thomas Friedman notes a conversation he had with a plant owner illustrating the widespread recognition of consumers' efforts to improve the lives of

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<sup>20</sup> Various sources cite "internal economic issues" as the principal reason for the Arab Spring that occurred in 2011; however, they each note that the citizens of those countries had grown continually dissatisfied with their standards of living. See Clemens Breisinger, Oliveier Ecker, and Perrihan Al-Riffai's "Economics of the Arab Awakening," *IFPRI Policy Brief 18*, (Washington, D.C.), May 1, 2011, <http://www.ifpri.org/sites/default/files/publications/bp018.pdf> (accessed July 5, 2013) and David Pollock "What Do the Arabs of East Jerusalem Really Want?" *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs* 11, no. 14 (September 7, 2011), <http://jcpa.org/article/what-do-the-arabs-of-east-jerusalem-really-want/> (accessed July 5, 2013).

<sup>21</sup> Lars H. Gulbrandsen, "Creating Markets for Eco-Labeling: Are Consumers Insignificant?" *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 30, no. 5 (2006): 479.

others.

I asked the plant owner, Mahesh Amalean, why the fancy factory? Why not a sweatshop? Wouldn't that be more lucrative for him? No, he explained...the only way to build long-term relationships with the big global brands is to produce higher- and higher-quality products under better and better working conditions... This is not because Victoria's Secret has suddenly become socially conscious, but because American consumers and college students have become more socially conscious as a result of some very high-profile antisweatshop campaigns. And these consumers are now telling stores that they do not want to be wearing goods made under sweatshop conditions.<sup>22</sup>

Consumers are growing more concerned about the safety and the environment of those who make the goods they buy. Shopping no longer merely concerns personal choices between brands, but using one's financial power to assist others in gaining liberation.<sup>23</sup>

Not only do economic and social theorists uphold Smith's view that consuming actualizes wealth and affects liberty, but the United States government also associates these twin boons with consumerism. Consumption is vital to the nation's financial growth with consumer spending accounting for nearly 70 percent of the country's economic activity in 2011.<sup>24</sup> The US government confirmed this view when it gave 110 billion dollars to over 130 million Americans in economic stimulus checks in 2008.<sup>25</sup> By providing individuals with additional discretionary cash, the government hoped the American people would spend this money on products and services and thereby jumpstart

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 177-178.

<sup>23</sup> The most recent and well-known instance of a brand attempting to become more transparent in order to fend off customers' backlash is the electronics maker, Apple, whose Foxconn factories received substantial attention in 2011-2012.

<sup>24</sup> Lucia Mutikani, "Growth Anemic, Debt Row Poses Recession Risk," *Reuters*, July 29, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/07/29/us-usa-economy-idUSTRE7662I420110729> accessed July 5, 2013).

<sup>25</sup> David Goldman, "First Stimulus Checks Arrive—What You Need to Know," *CNNMoney*, April 28, 2008, [http://money.cnn.com/2008/04/28/news/economy/rebate\\_update\\_monday/](http://money.cnn.com/2008/04/28/news/economy/rebate_update_monday/) (accessed July 5, 2013).

the economy into economic expansion. In short, the intention was to encourage individual spending (consumption) in order to create jobs (production) thereby providing opportunities for individuals to become less government-dependent (liberty).<sup>26</sup>

This is a time-honored perception rooted in American history. At the American National Exhibition in Moscow in 1959, Vice-President Richard Nixon espoused the idea that Americans' ability to buy any of the products available in the market demonstrates freedom. When discussing the superiority of the United States with Soviet Premier Nikita Khrushchev, Nixon did not focus on the space race or arms race, but on the consumer race.<sup>27</sup> For Nixon, citizens' ability to consume products was a key litmus test. This same mentality continues in the contemporary political arena. Former Republican National Committee chairman Marc Racicot advised 2012 presidential candidate Mitt Romney, "I would focus on economics, I would focus on healthcare, I would focus on job creation; I would focus upon the very essence of our freedom and our economic system in this country constantly and repetitively."<sup>28</sup> Racicot mentions "freedom" in conjunction with three issues currently debated as part of economic reform; however, he makes a distinction between "freedom" and "economic system" allowing for something else to connect the two. While Racicot does not explicitly name what that link is, if Nixon's perspective still holds true, the ability to consume material products is the tie that binds them.

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<sup>26</sup> There was also a \$787 billion stimulus package in 2009 which provided, among many other things, tax credits on both weekly paychecks and end-of-the-year tax returns.

<sup>27</sup> Elaine Tyler May, *Homeward Bound: American Families in the Cold War Era* (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 164.

<sup>28</sup> Robert Siegel, "Former GOP Chairs Weigh in on Upcoming Primaries," *NPR's All Things Considered*, February 29, 2012, <http://www.npr.org/2012/02/29/147666405/former-gop-chairs-weigh-in-on-upcoming-primaries> (July 5, 2013).



Continued consumption expands an individual's or nation's capital while increasing the natural liberty of those participating in it. This is evident in both Adam Smith's commercial market society and Karl Marx's communist command system. Modern economists and politicians continue identifying these two goods—freedom and prosperity—with consumption. Within economics, people clearly use the act of consuming as a means for achieving some final purpose, a fact which harmonizes with this study's definition of consumerism.

### **Consumerism and Its Role in Socio-Psychological Theory**

Economists and politicians focus on what consumerism brings to their respective fields, but the ordinary person sees consumption serving much more immediate and self-interested purposes. People have a tangential interest in job growth and increasing a community's standard of living; however, these are not the typical reasons they buy. Freedom for one's self and others is important, but often ancillary.<sup>29</sup> An individual's motivation for shopping does not come from a desire to continue society's fiscal well-being, increase the nation's gross national product, or even promote individual liberty, but rather out of self-interest.<sup>30</sup> Consumers frame the question more personally, "What do I gain by buying this product?"

According to Thorstein Veblen, the desire to persistently purchase goods and brands at a rate beyond an individual's biological needs is frequently an attempt to

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<sup>29</sup> While people do buy with the intention of helping others obtain their independence, this appears to be a secondary reason because the buyers still want something in exchange for their money. Otherwise, it would be a donation.

<sup>30</sup> This personal prerogative without regard for beneficence toward the larger body politic is considered the best interpretation of Adam Smith's meaning of "self-interest." He is not implying that individuals ought to intentionally assert their own welfare over against another's based upon power or indifference in some Nietzsche-esque fashion that has come to dominate our understanding of the phrase. Smith was an 18<sup>th</sup> century moral philosopher whose moral philosophy was based upon ideas of *sympathy*. See Rasmussen, *Problems and Promise*, 62-63.

display two social desires: “pecuniary status” and “identification with association groups.”<sup>31</sup> These serve as social manifestations of a person’s worth and affiliation within society. Veblen’s socio-psychological motives provide the earliest and most systematic explanation of how people use consumption for status and association. In *The Theory of the Leisure Class*, Veblen examines the consumptive practices of various socio-economic classes and provides an explanation for why social groups take part in the act of expenditure. They buy in order to demonstrate their similarities with the rich. The more money people spend on non-essential goods and services, the more evident is their wealth and consequently their position within society’s upper classes.

Influenced by Karl Marx,<sup>32</sup> Veblen’s use of the term “class” is instrumental for understanding his theory. By “class,” he means those social groupings based on the communal stratum of status rather than power or prosperity.<sup>33</sup> Veblen appropriates Marx’s theoretical work, but eschews the economist’s political views, continually seeking “to detach himself from Marx as well as from the Marxists.”<sup>34</sup> He accepts neither Marx’s determinism regarding class warfare nor the inevitable revolution Marx expects will

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<sup>31</sup> A third possibility for buying comes from some felt need for the good, perhaps based on one’s aesthetic taste or an internal, personal preference. While most people engage in this form of consuming, it stands outside the definition of consumerism here because it occurs occasionally. Also, the item is appreciated for itself rather than what it helps the consumer achieve.

<sup>32</sup> Douglas Dowd, “Thorstein Veblen,” in *Understanding Capitalism*, ed. Douglas Dowd (Sterling, VA: Pluto Press, 2002), 39.

<sup>33</sup> Veblen acknowledges that status is often proportional to an individual’s financial condition; however, he offers the academician as the quintessential example of belonging to a class without the financial resources: “Because of a presumed superiority and scarcity of the gifts and attainments that characterize their life, these classes are by convention subsumed under a higher social grade than their pecuniary grade should warrant... In any modern community where there is no priestly monopoly of these occupations, the people of scholarly pursuits are unavoidably thrown into contact with classes that are pecuniarily their superiors.” *Leisure Class*, 69-70.

<sup>34</sup> David Riesman, *Thorstein Veblen: A Critical Interpretation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975), 25.

result from such struggle. Instead, Veblen sees status as an evolutionary consequence of earlier pecuniary conditions and the economic caste structure as actuating an individual's social relationships. He dismisses ideas of an aggressive antagonism between economic rivals and instead finds that individuals and groups attempt to emulate the wealthy rather than usurp them. Social and economic classes are not in conflict with one another; they find themselves working inseparably in situations of both status and affiliation to secure people's place within society.

Each class strives to mirror its pecuniary superiors through acts of analogous consumption. Veblen's dual-rationale theory offers a clear explanation for how the purchasing and displaying of products achieves this imitation. A person engages in conspicuous consumption and conspicuous waste to reveal pedigree, taste, and standards that imitate members of the same or higher classes.<sup>35</sup> For Veblen, to consume resources beyond an individual's physiological needs expands her power, prestige, and wealth among her peers while epitomizing a standard of living desired by the social classes below her.

Veblen's socio-psychological approach differs from Smith's economic model in one important way. In economics, the act of consuming generates wealth for the person gaining the additional capital. From Veblen's perspective, however, the prestige for society and the individual comes when people lavishly display that wealth rather than merely amassing it. Having riches is meaningless if an individual does not know how to properly show it to others through conspicuous consumption. Until a person reveals the

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<sup>35</sup> Veblen differentiates between "conspicuous consumption" and "conspicuous waste;" however, they function in tandem, and the distinction is unimportant for this study. For a more in-depth study, see chapter four of Veblen, "Conspicuous Consumption," in *Leisure Class*.

degree of his wealth, he has little status despite his financial means. It is only when in possession of both particular material goods and the time for leisure activities that a person can gain a community with whom to associate. Having financial resources and time do not guarantee status within that group; however, Veblen posits that as individuals strive for either status or association, they consume in their effort to achieve that personal or social goal.

The pursuit of status and association are thoroughly intertwined and neither takes precedence over the other. Although they are distinct inducements, the two principles goad and promote each other. Any effort at naming status or association as the paramount reason for why people conspicuously consume quickly slips into support for the alternative explanation. However, Veblen does distinguish between the two, and delineating between status and association helps better explain how a socio-psychological understanding of consumerism contributes to this study.

### Status

Social ranking, or status, is what society confers upon a particular member of its community in reference to his or her occupation, prestige, and associations. Certain work or feats provide a person respect by their society which translates into higher communal status. With this increase in honor, a person receives greater prominence and deference from their society. For Veblen, status is an individual's principal pre-occupation. Whether done consciously or unconsciously, concerns surrounding rank guide a person's actions. People spend their lives trying to retain or improve how their community perceives them, and these individuals make choices regarding their leisure activities and spending practices accordingly. Status serves as one of the most elementary apparatuses

for structuring a community because of the power associated with it.

People showcase their status through the accumulation of private property.

Possessing objects that society considers valuable is necessary for individuals to gain and perpetuate communal respect.

Property now becomes the most easily recognised evidence of a reputable degree of success as distinguished from heroic or signal achievement. It therefore becomes the conventional basis of esteem. Its possession in some amount becomes necessary in order to any reputable standing in the community. It becomes indispensable to accumulate, to acquire property, in order to retain one's good name. When accumulated goods have in this way once become the accepted badge of efficiency, the possession of wealth presently assumes the character of an independent and definitive basis of esteem.<sup>36</sup>

Property equals wealth. The two are synonymous to the degree that they achieve higher levels of status for their possessor; the quantity of one's private property displays the greatness of one's stature within society.

Property extends beyond inanimate objects to include those people within one's household. Historically, wives, children, servants, and slaves demonstrated a man's wealth. For Veblen, wives in particular serve as the greatest representation of a man's pecuniary status. In polygynous cultures, only the materially rich can afford several wives, an act illustrating their wealth. A wife in monogamous societies reflects her husband's affluence by her ability to consume based on his superfluous resources. The more she can spend without concern of exhausting his wealth, the more property he must possess, thereby raising his status. Veblen identifies this practice of *vicarious consumption* by wives as a key display of prestige among men in burgeoning societies.

What people spend money on and how extravagantly they pay for those items—

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 19.

“waste” in Veblen’s terminology—verifies pecuniary success and, by extension, their status. This is nowhere more evident for Veblen than in those goods that fulfill basic human needs, particularly one’s attire. While everyone needs a coat, its expense indicates the owner’s status.

No one finds difficulty in assenting to the commonplace that the greater part of the expenditure incurred by all classes for apparel is incurred for the sake of a respectable appearance rather than for the protection of the person. And probably at no other point is the sense of shabbiness so keenly felt as it is if we fall short of the standard set by social usage in this matter of dress. It is true of dress in even a higher degree than of most other items of consumption, that people will undergo a very considerable degree of privation in the comforts or the necessities of life in order to afford what is considered a decent amount of wasteful consumption; so that it is by no means an uncommon occurrence, in an inclement climate, for people to go ill clad in order to appear well dressed.<sup>37</sup>

It is of paramount importance for people to appear in fashion. Being stylish is not about functionality or even quality, but revealing the quantity of an individual’s discretionary income.

Private property is foundational for gaining status in society. People retain their status by using the material wealth they possess to forego manual labor. Status does not come to misers who constantly work and refuse to employ their wealth in displays of leisure. Instead, the highest social honors go to those who have the means to avoid physical labor and do. In all economic stages of a civilization, the amount of non-industrial work people perform communicates their rank within society. This is a primary measure of individuals’ status within a society.

Veblen recognizes an inverse relationship between toil and status. Farmers, herders, hunters, and other menial laborers—those who supply the physical needs of a

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 103.

community—obtain fewer honors, while the more materially unproductive occupations of philosophers, priests, and warriors receive the highest veneration. This remains true today. Mechanics and factory workers receive less prestige in comparison to stock analysts or CEOs. Minimal physical labor accords a person greater esteem within the community because it demonstrates a reservoir of wealth that allows one to maintain life's necessities while pursuing less physical occupations. Those members of society possessing enough wealth to not work at all Veblen identifies as *the leisure class*.<sup>38</sup>

As a group, the leisure class provides few material benefits by way of physical labor to the community; instead, their contribution is to exemplify the paradigmatic lifestyle of society. Veblen does not view this class as lazy or ineffectual; rather, the title *leisure class* refers to the time necessary for this group to acquire the appropriate knowledge of discrimination that separates theirs from the other classes. Belonging to the leisure class requires its members to recognize and distinguish between aesthetics and decorum, what Veblen calls “marks of expensiveness,” which separates theirs from the other classes. In this way, the process is circular: the leisure class work at displaying the community's ideals of success, and society confers status upon the leisure class because they are the embodiment of the community's highest aims.

As the society's exemplar, the leisure class is responsible for providing the lower classes with appropriate criteria of what financial success looks like. It presents people with an image of what to strive for and mimic. The leisure class sets the societal standards of living and the expressions of pecuniary behavior toward which every member of the society must aim. Status is conferred based upon a member's ability to

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 1.

observe the same practices as the leisure class—first, with regard to whether an individual has the resources to spend on emulating the higher economic classes, and second, if a person has an appropriate amount of free time to devote to learning the leisure class’s art of discrimination.

Social classes are evolving entities, and all classes must continually endeavor to retain their status throughout change. This can prove difficult when innovations and technological progress lead to higher wages and increased leisure time for workers. The additional discretionary income and leisure to study allows the lower ranks opportunities previously only available to the wealthy. As members of the lower classes gain a mental or spiritual acumen similar to the upper class, a transformation takes place. Leisure no longer serves as the trademark of the upper echelon, but “consumption begins to hold over leisure as an ordinary means of decency.”<sup>39</sup> Both leisure and consumption express status, but the latter replaces the former as society becomes more affluent.

Veblen posits that a community’s overall increase in discretionary income requires the leisure class to transform into the consumerist class to retain social status. The goods they buy and the prices they pay testify to their prestige. Participating in acts of conspicuous consumption and elegant waste authenticates a person’s status. “Simple conspicuous waste of goods is effective and gratifying as far as it goes; it is good *prima facie* evidence of pecuniary success, and consequently *prima facie* evidence of social worth.”<sup>40</sup> Society, in Veblen’s perspective, recognizes wealth and status as intimately linked, and therefore one presumes the other.

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 104.



Veblen's view that wealth and status disclose an individual's value within society fits well with the meaning of consumerism used in this study. For Veblen, people consume for the purpose of displaying and expanding their status; however, the conditions that make up the *appropriate* standard of living for each class changes over time. This results in lifestyle practices that require constantly consuming goods and services to maintain social standing. The dynamism of classes also forces individuals to conspicuously consume and extravagantly waste to even greater degrees if they want to improve their prestige. Veblen's status principle explains people's constant need and desire to buy more; they are using consumption as a means of achieving some personal or social end. Such practices coincide with the definition of consumerism.

#### Association

An individual's associations, according to Veblen, come from recognizing his social class. Multiple criteria make up a social class, including similar financial conditions, a sanctioned standard of living, and a shared understanding of one's own class in relation to other classes. In Veblen's theory, associates have comparable interpretations of "appropriate" standards of living, behaviors, and financial expenditures, and they often demonstrate their material success in parallel forms. People often live together in neighborhoods that are geographically distinct from the classes above or below themselves.<sup>41</sup> In this way, a common standard of living for the community develops and influences the activities of its members.

According to Veblen, associations form among people with comparable financial

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<sup>41</sup> William J. Wilson, *When Work Disappears* (New York: Knopf, 1996) presents a good study of how this has happened particularly to the urban working and unemployed poor. Naomi Klein, *Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2008), 177-193 addresses a similar situation but from the perspective of suburban communes in chapter seven of her book.

resources, based on similar material goods and ways of living, as they attempt to mirror the paradigmatic lifestyle of the leisure class. Veblen sees this form of association as both the norm and aim of most individuals:

For the great body of the people in any modern community, the proximate ground of expenditure in excess of what is required for physical comfort is not a conscious effort to excel in the expensiveness of their visible consumption, so much as it is a desire to live up to the conventional standard of decency in the amount and grade of goods consumed. This desire is not guided by a rigidly invariable standard, which must be lived up to, and beyond which there is no incentive to go. The standard is flexible; and especially it is indefinitely extensible, if only time is allowed for habituation to any increase in pecuniary ability and for acquiring facility in the new and larger scale of expenditure that follows such an increase.<sup>42</sup>

A person must fall within a community's established monetary limits in order to belong and remain part of that group. She must also be able and willing to financially embrace the standards and conventions demanded by that community's measure. Abiding in these activities demonstrates her continued association.

There is no single lifestyle that enjoins every person regardless of club or class; associations institute expressions particular to themselves in an effort to include or exclude others. The conditions set forth by a given association appear natural to its members and establish what it understands to be a "decent lifestyle."

[The standard of living commends] itself to his common sense as right and good, through his habitually contemplating it and assimilating the scheme of life in which it belongs; but it does so also indirectly through popular insistence on conformity to the accepted scale of expenditure as a matter of propriety, under pain of disesteem and ostracism. To accept and practice the standard of living which is in vogue is both agreeable and expedient, commonly to the point of being indispensable to personal comfort and to success in life. The standard of living of any class, so far as concerns the element of conspicuous waste, is commonly as high as the earning capacity of the class will permit—with a constant tendency to go

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<sup>42</sup> Veblen, *Leisure Class*, 63.

higher.<sup>43</sup>

Standards of living and the classes that perpetuate them are social constructs. An associate group defines what it accepts as a suitable station in life.

Preserving one's affiliations therefore requires that one abide by the community's standard of living. In an economically prosperous society, material living conditions improve for every caste due to the "universal opulence which extends itself to the lowest ranks of people."<sup>44</sup> Members of all classes find that as their community's mean expenditure increases, they need to exhibit similar patterns and degrees of conspicuous consumption and extravagant waste in order to remain within their association groups. Veblen says that "the standard of expenditure which commonly guides our efforts is not the average, ordinary expenditure already achieved; it is an ideal of consumption that lies just beyond our reach, or to reach which requires some strain."<sup>45</sup> The average level of material decency in any group expands to incorporate additional luxuries. While these amenities had previously belonged solely to a higher economic class, increases in capital resources and decreases in production costs make such goods available to more people. Therefore, remaining in an associate group requires the constant consumption of goods.

As with status, there is a clear link between Veblen's thoughts on how people maintain associations and the modern practice of consumerism. The goods and brands a person buys mark his identity with an association group, often along financial lines; however, individuals must continually prove their fellowship by upgrading their lifestyles to coincide with the associate group's increasing standards of living. The acts of

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 68-69.

<sup>44</sup> Smith, *Wealth of Nations*, 16.

<sup>45</sup> Veblen, *Leisure Class*, 64.

purposefully buying brands and goods to maintain membership within a social group epitomizes the psycho-sociological aspect of consumerism. This associative mentality is most evident among teenagers and young adults who justify their consumptive desires with the tag, “Everyone has one!” The sentiment is a plea to stay in step with their peers.

Veblen’s themes of status and association are still apropos, but his social assumptions were limited by his context. Using his key points, Roger Mason reinterprets Veblen for today’s more affluent, homogenous, and equitable Western society in his book *Conspicuous Consumption*. More people in many societies have greater amounts of wealth, thereby creating a growing middle class who can afford numerous opportunities to engage in a wider variety of activities. Not only this, but people are aware of countless avocations available to them through the mediums of television and the internet. Perhaps the greatest difference, though, is that women and minorities are no longer extensions of a man’s possessions; they are autonomous and contributing members of society. These social changes allow people the possibility of participating in organizations despite their economic classes. Today, groups form around common interests more frequently than pecuniary worth.

People still seek association and status, but they now do it through membership and aspirant groups. The former are those organizations which people participate in and are accepted by based upon similar predilections or a *Weltanschauung*. This is affiliation. Aspirant groups, however, stand outside the immediate participatory reach of an individual; the goal is to achieve acceptance into that circle. These groups offer status. Like Veblen, Mason sees association and status as co-mingling motives; “[people] will

have either horizontal (within-group) or vertical (between-group) objectives.”<sup>46</sup>

Individuals show their continued affiliation within their member groups through the goods they buy (association), but also display their financial wellbeing to the circle by way of the prestigiousness of the products (status). People may also display suitably appropriate consumptive patterns to other groups to which they aspire to gain belonging (association) in order to improve their social honor (status). Mason’s membership and aspirant groups bring forward Veblen’s status and association motivations for consuming in the contemporary social milieu.

There can be little doubt that people buy and use goods at least partially to fulfill some socio-psychological purpose in their lives. Thorstein Veblen’s categories of status and association offer rationales that still hold. Contemporary American society does equate wealth with social status (and vice versa), and the need to demonstrate the latter through the use of the former is crucial. Yet, social and economic conditions have changed since Veblen’s era, and Roger Mason updates Veblen’s basic premises to show that people still consume for the purpose of associations. What is most beneficial from the work of these two social theorists for this project is their emphasis on wealthy society’s need to exhibit status and association through consumption. This adheres to the stated definition of consumerism: the name for those acts of shopping, buying, and using goods and services in order to achieve some social goal or end.

### **Consumerism and Its Role in Theories of Religion**

In addition to consumerism’s relationship to economic life and social standing, there is a growing trend to consider its connection to religion. Buddhists, Christians,

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<sup>46</sup> Roger Mason, *Conspicuous Consumption* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1981), 25.

Hindus, Jews, and Muslims are analyzing how the ubiquitous reach of consumerism affects their faith communities. The two most common lines of examination people take when considering consumerism and religion are “consuming religion” and “a religion of consumption.” The first approach addresses the shifts that occur when devotees see religion as a track to some personal objective. People employ the belief system to some purpose outside of its sanctioned use. The second considers how acts of unfettered consumption actually serve as a religion for a growing portion of the world’s population. Proponents of various religions typically espouse one of these two tacks when discussing the ways consumerism moves into the field of religion.

### Consuming Religion

When people consume religion, they replace the holy rationale of an observance or ritual with a non-religious motive. Individuals continue to comply with the set customs, but deviate from the intended meditative aims of encountering the numinous. People add new meaning to the visible practices of the religion in order to attend to some non-theological goal, such as displaying personal association or status. The original, spiritually-significant meaning behind a religion succumbs to material opportunism. Individuals separate the physical symbols of a religion by giving them a new context apart from their religious rationale, confusing the means with the end.

An example of consuming religion involves the co-opting of holy days as opportunities for unrestrained consumption. While the consumerization of sacred days poses problems for all faith traditions, Hinduism is experiencing this struggle as *Diwali* transforms into a gift-buying phenomenon. During the annual five-day festival of lights celebration, people burn oil in earthen bowls to remind them of *Atman*, the inner light

that extinguishes spiritual ignorance. However, the traditional clay lamps are giving way to “less cumbersome and more glitzy plastic and electric lamps.”<sup>47</sup> Not only do people want stylized lamps, but the rising middle-class and rich also are increasing the amount of money they spend for the holiday. In 2009, Indians spent an average of \$213 on household and beauty items, entertainment, and presents for Diwali.<sup>48</sup> The holy week has now become an excuse for a multi-billion dollar shopping extravaganza for India’s growing consumerist class. As politicians, economists, business people, and shoppers conflate Diwali with material prosperity, attention to its spiritual significance wanes.

Christian holy days have likewise been co-opted by the consumerist mentality. In the West, the shift from meditating on God to an unmitigated desire for the next great product is most evident during the Christmas season. Shopping and buying are prevalent themes during Christmas.

Although the liturgical heartbeat of the Christian calendar thumps a christocentric message of grace, other tones are pounded by cultural whims and consumerist values.... Advent seems to have been so transformed by cultural norms that it has become merely a quaint reminder of the bygone spirituality of a former era.<sup>49</sup>

The allure of sales and the pressure to give the perfect present has reshaped the holy day far beyond its original meaning; “sixty-seven percent of all Americans agree that, ‘many of the things I enjoy during the Christmas season have nothing to do with the birth of

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<sup>47</sup> Nadan Nagar, “Potters in Tripura Doing Brisk Diwali Business,” *AndhraNews.net*, October 20, 2011, <http://www.andhranews.net/India/2011/Potters-Tripura-doing-brisk-Diwali-business-9284.htm>. (accessed July 5, 2013).

<sup>48</sup> PayPal, “PayPal Survey Reveals Indians are Expected to Spend More this Diwali than They Did Last Year,” *Business Wire India*, October 08, 2009, <http://www.businesswireindia.com/PressRelease.asp?b2mid=20281> (accessed July 5, 2013).

<sup>49</sup> Paul Myhre, “Has Advent Succumbed to Consumerism?” *Word & World* 27, no. 4 (2007): 408.

Jesus Christ.”<sup>50</sup> The celebration of Jesus Christ entering the world has been replaced with the activity of shopping.

Consuming religion refers not only to buying presents and spending lavishly, but it is also the secularization of the rituals and practices. For many Christians, the quintessential moment that many churches failed to retain the sacred meaning of Christmas was in 2005. Christmas day was on a Sunday that year, and several megachurches canceled services citing both family-friendly and economic reasons: there would simply not be enough parishioners to justify opening their doors on Christmas.<sup>51</sup> Various denominational and religious leaders lamented the decisions of these congregations’ motives in the editorial columns of publications as wide ranging as the *New York Times* to *Christianity Today*. The critics argued that by canceling Christmas Day services, these churches were fostering a mindset that encourages people to consume religion as they would any other commodity.

### Consumption as Religion

Beyond consuming religion lies the idea that consumerism can function as a religion, giving meaning and purpose to people’s lives and addressing questions regarding human worth. Economics and sociology offer incentives to consume, but these alone do not describe the depth and breadth of significance people can attach to consumerism. The participation in and act of continual buying and consuming serves as

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<sup>50</sup> Chris Turner, “Research: Pastors Plan to Host Christmas Services Despite Busyness of Christmas Day,” *LifeWay Research*, November 29, 2011, <http://www.lifeway.com/ArticleView?storeId=10054&catalogId=10001&langId=-1&article=LifeWay-Research-Pastors-plan-to-host-Christmas-services-despite-busyness-of-Christmas-Day> (accessed July 5, 2013).

<sup>51</sup> Ted Olsen, “Megachurches Won’t Hold Sunday Services December 25,” *Christianity Today*, April 13, 2006, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2005/decemberweb-only/31.0.html?start=2> (accessed July 5, 2013). Cally Parkinson, a spokeswoman for Willow Creek Community Church, states the church was giving families a respite from the hustle and bustle of the day as well as being cost-conscious.



the all-encompassing preoccupation for many in the United States. In the words of Paul Tillich, consuming can be a person's "ultimate concern."

Tillich uses the phrase "ultimate concern" to refer to faith. He states, "Faith is a total and centered act of the personal self, the act of unconditional, infinite and ultimate concern."<sup>52</sup> He does not delimit who or what the recipient of this faith can be because he recognizes the diversity of humanity's ultimate concerns. However, Tillich names the object receiving utmost preoccupation god: "everything which is a matter of unconditional concern is made into a god."<sup>53</sup> Utmost loyalty to one's nation or absolute fidelity to Yahweh—the devotee can bestow godhood upon whatever serves as the supreme object of her or his life. Tillich makes clear, though, that for an individual's ultimate concern to be and remain god, the disciple must engage with it in some way.<sup>54</sup> It ceases to be faith if a person does nothing toward participating with the Ultimate.

Tillich differentiates between faith and a colloquial meaning of religion that many people imply when they identify consumerism as a religion. People often intend some organizational or institutional establishment when they use the word religion. Tillich defines it differently: "religion, in the largest and most basic sense of the word, is ultimate concern...Religion is the substance, the ground, and the depth of man's spiritual life."<sup>55</sup> He understands religion in its broadest meaning as synonymous with faith; the two words describe individuals' practices toward their gods—their ultimate concerns. Asserting this definition of religion allows theologians and moral philosophers to aptly

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<sup>52</sup> Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Perennial, 2001), 9-10.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 116.

<sup>55</sup> Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford, 1959), 8.

locate consumption within the confines of religion. Tillich's characterization of religion as "what concerns one ultimately" provides a useful lens for addressing three distinct, yet connected, approaches currently used to label consumption a religion: idolatrous, spiritual, and religious.

### **Idolatrous Approach**

Defining consumerism as idolatry means taking some lesser good or god and amalgamating it with or exalting it above an already accepted supreme deity or principle. The faithful do not fall away from a particular belief system in this situation so much as realign their veneration. It is not conversion from a religion, but rather its corruption. Consumerism as an idolatry appears similar to what occurs during consuming religion. The numinous is displaced. The difference, however, is that idolatry concerns believers who practice a distortion of the religion, while consuming religion allows non-believers and believers alike to use religious symbols for non-religious purposes. This distinction is important because it allows consumerism to be placed within the confines of religion by identifying it as an idolatry, a perversion of an accepted religion.

In his book *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*, John Kavanaugh takes the position that consumerism is an idolatry within Christianity. Assuming his readers have a religious belief system similar to his own, Kavanaugh contends that many adherents have identified faith with "cultural standards, even cultural idols"<sup>56</sup> instead of "how [Jesus Christ's] saving action, how his people and its traditions, all offer a most stunning contrast to cultural idols."<sup>57</sup> He draws upon the accounts of Christ in the Gospels and

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<sup>56</sup> John Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2006), xiv.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

Pope John Paul II's papal teachings to show how people's relationship with God and others *is* the paramount message of Christianity. In order for human consumption to be a good for the Christian believer, it must facilitate these two aims. However, consumerism fails at this because it inverts the biblical paradigm, so that "one's heart, no longer a throne wherein the transcendent personal God might dwell, no longer engaged by a knowing and loving trinitarian encounter of other persons, is restless until it rests—now anchored or even chained by the promises of possessions."<sup>58</sup> Within consumerism, material things supersede Christians' relationship with God and others.

Kavanaugh elaborates on the consequences of being a society that is thing-oriented. Focusing on economic structures and media advertising, he contrasts consumerism's alternate understanding of personal worth and the purpose of life with his Christian perspective. Consumer society sees human subjects as commodities. Industries and businesses market their wares to become wealthy and gain status, not to better human interconnectivity. Individuals neglect their fellow creatures or use them for self-serving purposes. The "other" is worthwhile to the extent that she or he is self-sufficient or benefits one's personal goals. When this perspective guides ideas of human value, "the personal experience of being loved or being believed in, the act of trusting or caring for another person, the knowledge of certain moral principles concerning human dignity and potentiality, all become inaccessible..."<sup>59</sup> To accept consumerism's interpretation of human worth distorts the Christian interpretation.

Kavanaugh uses the term idolatry to challenge his audience to see a clear

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 48.

distinction between consumerism and Christianity. The theologically charged term “idolatry” reminds his readers of the familiar biblical story of Moses on Mt. Sinai. After being released from their captivity in Egypt, Moses receives the Ten Commandments on the mountain while the Israelites wait for him down below. One sees the irony when the newly liberated slaves are casting an idol of a golden calf even as God is giving the second commandment to not worship idols. Kavanaugh employs this story to caution against conjoining Christianity with consumerism: “while the free covenant with the living God is a call out of bondage and idolatry, the people of God are at the same time and by that very reason called into a new life of relatedness—not only with God, but with their fellow human beings.”<sup>60</sup> Kavanaugh names consumerism an idolatry because it supplants the God-ordained “life of relatedness” with the Divine and others into relationships of expediency.

### **Spiritual Approach**

Other scholars name consumerism a religion based on how people engage with it to fulfill their spiritual needs—how consumerism functions religiously for individuals. This approach differs from the idolatrous one: idolatry is an adulteration of a given religion’s practices or doctrines, while spirituality extends beyond a particular institutionalized belief system or interpretation of doctrines. Spirituality involves a person’s perceptions of and experiences with the meaning of life, death, and human purpose. This understanding of spirituality equates to Paul Tillich’s definition and use of the term religion, which he describes as “an aspect of depth in the totality of the human

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 91.

spirit.”<sup>61</sup> Spirituality is the overall shape of one’s thoughts and actions in everyday life as informed by one’s ultimate concern. People of all religions as well as no religion can claim to be spiritual beings.

William Cavanaugh states that many people employ consumerism as a means of satiating a spiritual urge within them. Individuals’ true interest with unmitigated consumption is not about buying and accumulating goods, but satiating a yearning within them. Cavanaugh argues that if people cared about their purchases, they would be materialistic. Materialists give great attention to the care and upkeep of the possessions they strive to attain. However, people are consumeristic; they disregard the prize in order to redouble their efforts toward the next purchase.<sup>62</sup> A product has little actual value for the consumerist once it has been bought.

Because of how quickly people’s attention turns to the next consumable good, Cavanaugh holds that individuals use consumerism to meet their spiritual needs. “For many people, consumerism is a type of spirituality, even if they do not recognize it as such. It is a way of pursuing meaning and identity, a way of connecting with other people.”<sup>63</sup> Consumerism touches humanity’s spiritual nature (ultimate concern) through the ethereal act of shopping, and becomes a sacred exercise in realizing feelings of the sublime. Tricia Sheffield believes the amalgamation between consumerism and spirituality is so strong that “the acts of shopping and consuming have become ‘religious’

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<sup>61</sup> Tillich, *Culture*, 5. The word “spiritual” being used here updates Tillich’s terms “religion” and “faith” for the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. It seems to better encompass what Tillich meant when he offered these terms as signifiers of an individual’s ultimate concern.

<sup>62</sup> Alan Durning *How Much Is Enough?* (NY: Norton, 1992), 90 specifies between materialism and consumerism. Although Cavanaugh does not explicitly make this distinction, his argument echoes Durning’s differentiation.

<sup>63</sup> William Cavanaugh, *Being Consumed* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2008), 36.

rituals... due to the mediator role of advertising.”<sup>64</sup>

Rodney Clapp expands the association of consumerism and the spiritual in his study of Protestantism’s “theology of consumption.” Clapp’s theology of consumption refers to Protestant sects’ sanctification of buying and selling goods as a means of fostering spiritual formation. Using the work of sociologist Colin Campbell, Clapp recounts the stories of Asa Candler, the marketer of Coca-Cola, and John Wanamaker, founder of Wanamaker department stores. These genuinely pious business owners not only carried their theological ardor over into a passion for their products, but at times conflated them. In 1912, Candler “promoted [Coca-Cola] with something like evangelistic zeal... [making] it the best-advertised product in the United States” and “liked to conclude sales meetings with a group singing of ‘Onward Christian Soldiers.’”<sup>65</sup> Wanamaker used his stores to both create product demand and Christian reverence. During the Christmas holidays, he turned “his Philadelphia store into a veritable cathedral, replete with stained glass, stars and angelic statuary. The effect was so churchlike that gentlemen, upon entering, instinctively doffed their hats.”<sup>66</sup> Ties binding consumption and the spiritual remain just as prevalent today.

Modern health-and-wealth preachers continue to frame divine blessings within a theology of consumption. A person’s ability to consume is a display of God’s favor; physical and material well-being demonstrates spiritual blessings. This is the crux of Joel Osteen’s doctrine. Weaving biblical stories and passages with his own and others’

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<sup>64</sup> Tricia Sheffield, *Religious Dimensions of Advertising*, Religion/Culture/Critique (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 112.

<sup>65</sup> Rodney Clapp, “The Theology of Consumption & the Consumption of Theology,” in *The Consuming Passion*, ed. Rodney Clapp (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 181-182.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 182.

experiences, he encourages Christians to prepare for a season of increase because “you were born for better than this; you are meant to live at a higher level than you are currently.”<sup>67</sup> While Osteen equivocates guaranteeing wealth and fame for every believer, he challenges his audience throughout his books and sermons to “declare favor over your finances. Speak victory over sickness, freedom over addiction. You may need to shift into a higher gear if you are not speaking enough faith over your life. If you have big dreams, you’ll need to declare favor in a big, big way.”<sup>68</sup> The prosperity gospel teaches that God wants believers to desire more by providing greater opportunities to consume commensurate with their spirituality.

Cavanaugh and Clapp recognize that people consume as an act of spirituality, and the two authors attempt to relocate humanity’s ultimate concern within the confines of Christianity. Because consuming is a formational act for Cavanaugh, he wants to place it under the authority of the Eucharist. Partaking of the elements reminds believers that their consumption is a spiritual communion that unifies them with God and the common good. Clapp also sees consumption as a fallen attempt at fulfilling human spiritual desires, but believes its redemption will come when “lion will lie with lamb, and no child will want for food, and every act of consumption will be an act of praise.”<sup>69</sup> These Christian theologians acknowledge that people use consumerism to fulfill spiritual desires, so they warn against making the “hallowedness” of consumerism—rather than Christianity—an ultimate concern.

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<sup>67</sup> Joel Osteen, *Become a Better You* (New York: Free Press, 2007), xiii.

<sup>68</sup> Joel Osteen, *It’s Your Time* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 124-125.

<sup>69</sup> Clapp, “Theology of Consumption,” 204.

## Religious Approach

The final way of categorizing a religion of consumption is to understand it as a religion *per se*. It is neither a corruption of a religion (idolatry) nor a personal ultimate concern (spirituality); consumerism *is* a religion in its function and form. Those who name consumerism a religion recognize that people may address their ultimate concern through consuming; however, consumerism also shares conventions found in other traditional religions. It entails customs and beliefs that shape and identify individuals as participants in consumerism, while at the same time using these formative practices as a means of distinguishing consumerism from other faith traditions.

Buddhist philosopher David Loy considers consumerism an autonomous religion whose dogma teaches the importance of self through consumption. Greed serves as the motivating principle for the religion of consumption and leads to a life of disillusionment. Drawing upon the Buddhist teaching of *anatta* (the illusion of self), he juxtaposes his religious tradition's practice of "experiencing life free of narrow, self-interested perspectives" with how "increasingly we are conditioned to construct our self-identity through consumption."<sup>70</sup> Buddhism promotes practices of generosity and selflessness while "consumerism not only overlooks the superior joy of giving to others, it forecloses the ontological realization of nonduality between myself and others."<sup>71</sup> In all of this, Loy understands that "consumerism functions as a religion for a rapidly increasing number of

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<sup>70</sup> Jonathan Watts and David Loy, "The Religion of Consumption: A Buddhist Perspective," *Development* 41, no. 1 (1998): 62.

<sup>71</sup> David Loy, "Religion of the Market," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 65, no.2 (1997): 288.



people worldwide.”<sup>72</sup>

Another critic who names consumerism a religion is Bill Talen, a performer/activist who tours the country as his stage persona Reverend Billy. Reverend Billy and his Church of Stop Shopping put on melodramatic crusades proclaiming Mickey Mouse as the Antichrist, performing exorcisms of credit cards and Wal-Mart, offering laments over corporations’ ecologically destructive activities, and creating subversive hymns.<sup>73</sup> He uses his gimmick as an “evangelist” to preach against the religious forms manifest in the religion of consumerism. Talen’s ability to correlate a mentality of inordinate consumptive desires (consumerism) with a practiced, organized, and over-arching belief system (religion) creates a potent critique.

The problem is that critics like David Loy and Reverend Billy forego developing a systematic account of how they are able to name consumerism a religion. This makes their appraisal suspect due to its lack of authentication. To substantiate their view that consumerism is a religion, there needs to be some means of aptly locating consumerism within this category. Only then will such a critique of consumerism be valid.

### **Conclusion**

This chapter offers a framework which considers consumerism in relationship to economics, sociology, and religion. Each of these categories contributes to the overall understanding of consumerism used in this study. Adam Smith shows that continual consumption leads to both wealth and individual liberty, two facets that give a rationale for the widespread practice of consumerism. Thorstein Veblen presents a more intimate

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<sup>72</sup> Watts and Loy, “The Religion of Consumption,” 62.

<sup>73</sup> These events and others like them are found in the documentary *What Would Jesus Buy?* DVD, directed by Rob VanAlkemade (New York: Arts Alliance America, 2008).

reason why individuals pursue social and personal aims by way of consumerism: to display status and association. Finally, consumerism intersects religion through Tillich's notion of one's ultimate concern, leading theologians, moral philosophers, and activists to identify consumerism as a religion in one aspect or another.

While the next two chapters focus on consumerism as a religion and the ethic of that religion, the work of Smith and Veblen continue to inform how this study identifies consumerism as a religion. From Smith, consumerism introduces a degree of personal autonomy and an ability to display a natural liberty. Using Veblen's theory, individuals demonstrate who they are and want to be through consumerism. These ideas are particularly prominent during the discussion on the ethic of consumerism. But first the focus turns toward a phenomenological description of religion, one which forms the rubric for examining the claim that consumerism is in fact a religion.

## CHAPTER TWO

### EXPLORING CONSUMERISM IN RELATION TO RELIGION

Religious beliefs proper are always shared by a definite group that professes them and that practices the corresponding rites. Not only are they individually accepted by all members of that group, but they also belong to the group and unify it. The individuals who comprise the group feel joined to one another by the fact of common faith. A society whose members are united because they imagine the sacred world and its relations with the profane world in the same way, and because they translate this common representation into identical practices, is what is called a Church. —Emile Durkheim<sup>1</sup>

Individuals commonly express the opinion that an unmitigated desire for more is opposed to a religious orientation on life.<sup>2</sup> Therefore, when moral ethicists and theologians like David Loy and John Cobb, Jr. identify consumerism—and its handmaiden “economism”<sup>3</sup>—as religions, the idea is often met with skepticism. It is not immediately obvious that consumerism belongs in the category of religion. Two possible

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<sup>1</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen Fields (New York: Free Press, 1995), 41.

<sup>2</sup> These are the general sentiments I receive when discussing my dissertation with others. Similar remarks can be found in *What Would Jesus Buy?*

<sup>3</sup> John Cobb, Jr., “Consumerism, Economism, and Christian Faith,” (paper, Sixth International Meeting of the Buddhist/Christian Conference, Tacoma, WA, August, 2000). *Religion-Online* (July 2001), <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3353> (accessed July 5, 2013). Economism is the term John Cobb gives to economics sacralized to the status of a religion. In this article, Cobb continues to identify economism as “a more fundamental force in society than consumerism.” However, he makes several remarks that imply that consumerism trumps economism as the directive for most individuals. “For the economy to function well we need not only ever-increasing consumption but also ever-increasing investment, which requires ever-increasing saving.” Yet other research shows the percentage of Americans who invest or save money is a relatively small number. This is all the more true for the world’s poor. Cobb may be correct to think that economism is “the first truly successful world religion;” however, I am uncertain it is so much the religion of the masses but the religion of the wealthy. David Loy also names economics a religion in, “Religion of the Market,” but has since expanded this position to concur with Watts’s thesis that consumerism serves as a religion for the masses in, “Religion of Consumption.”

reasons for this reluctance are consumerism's lack of namable deities and its banality.

The lack of a god and a preoccupation with the mundane are expressly counter to the spiritual and sublime concerns of religion. There appears to be nothing extraordinary in providing for life's necessities through the common, everyday activities of shopping and buying.

Drawing upon the previous chapter's description of religion, consumerism needs to fulfill two criteria to attain the status of a religion: it must be a person's ultimate concern, and it must manifest itself in identifiably religious ways. The first criterion aligns with the spiritual approach and the work of Paul Tillich: a religion offers ultimate meaning to its participants. David Loy states that religion is "what grounds us by teaching us what the world *is*, and what our *role* in the world is."<sup>4</sup> This is the meaning many theologians, moral ethicists, and philosophers intend when they speak of consumerism as a religion. Acts of buying and shopping transcend physical needs by providing an overarching story explaining the world at large and how humanity ought to live in it. Consuming garners higher meaning and purpose for humanity, and as later discussed, offers a form of salvation from the temporal situation. If it achieves this, then consumerism functions as a religion.

The second criterion for naming consumerism a religion examines the phenomena that occur within virtually all religions. These serve as categories to describe what religion looks like based upon observable forms. Having such a framework to delineate religion provides a way of determining whether or not consumerism fulfills this second test. This study adopts Ninian Smart's seven dimensions that he sees as constitutive of all

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<sup>4</sup> Loy, "Religion of the Market," 275. Emphasis his.

religions: doctrinal, experiential, material, narrative, ritual, social, and ethical. Using these categories, this chapter examines whether consumerism is a religion in accordance with Smart's dimensional forms.

What follows is an examination of how and to what degree consumerism fittingly belongs within the field of religion by way of a phenomenological approach. The first section details six of the seven phenomena that describe and delineate religion. The last category, the ethical dimension, receives full attention in chapter three. Smart's dimensions provide a broad enough scope to incorporate consumerism within religion; yet, they are restrictive enough to prevent labeling every theory and philosophy a religion. Ninian Smart's *Dimensions of the Sacred* provides the phenomenological demarcations for this study and lays a framework for exploring consumerism as a religion. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how consumerism integrates each of these constitutive religious dimensions.

### **A Phenomenological Approach to Religion**

More Americans than ever, especially younger adults who have always lived in a consumer society, are leaving organized religion; yet, they state they are “spiritual.”<sup>5</sup> If interest in formalized religion is waning, one might wonder what value there is in examining consumerism in light of such conventional beliefs. Perhaps religion has so little purchase for large numbers of people that identifying consumerism as a religion is inconsequential. Yet Mircea Eliade, a major twentieth century theorist of religion, addresses this supposition:

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<sup>5</sup> Cathy Gossman, “Survey: 72% of Millennials ‘More Spiritual than Religious’,” *USAToday*, October 14, 2010, [http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2010-04-27-1Amillfaith27\\_ST\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2010-04-27-1Amillfaith27_ST_N.htm) (accessed July 5, 2013).

To whatever degree [nonreligious people] may have desacralized the world, the man who has made his choice in favor of a profane life never succeeds in completely doing away with religious behavior.... It will appear that even the most desacralized existence still preserves traces of a religious valorization of the world.<sup>6</sup>

From politics to economics to entertainment, religion is omnipresent in human life because

one of the salient features of all religions is their 'imperialistic temper,' not necessarily because each religion attempts to dominate other peoples, though this too has happened all too often in history, but more basically because each religion *defines* the nature and levels of reality, including ultimate reality, which is the source of cosmic, social, and human order.<sup>7</sup>

Examining whether consumerism is a religion should not be eschewed; instead, what is needed is a more extensive way to understand consumerism in view of the growing religious diversity and detachment.

In order to achieve a broader category of religion, it is useful to find a schema for clarifying what religion is and identifying its place in society. Those who study religion often use one of three methodologies to do this. These are the functional, substantive, and phenomenological approaches. The first two explore the role or the purpose religion plays in communities. Religion is viewed as a human construct that society uses for regulating the moral values of its people in addition to giving their lives meaning and order. Religion is also the vehicle for acculturating persons into the society in which they live. The third method—the phenomenological approach—differs in that it offers criteria that are constitutive of religion and describes religion based on common phenomena.

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<sup>6</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Sacred & Profane*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987), 23.

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Kitagawa, *The History of Religions* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1987), 166. Emphasis his.

The functionalist interpretation of religion comes largely from Emile Durkheim's understanding of how religions function in society. The French sociologist saw religion as the primary social activity of every culture and as the way of disclosing that culture's values and beliefs back onto itself. Because religion is the expression of the collective societal consciousness,

we can say that nearly all the great social institutions were born in religion. For the principal features of collective life to have begun as none other than various features of religious life, it is evident that religious life must necessarily have been the eminent form and, as it were, the epitome of collective life. If religion gave birth to all that is essential in society, that is so because the idea of society is the soul of religion.<sup>8</sup>

For Durkheim and fellow functionalists, the study of religion deserves the attentions of sociology and anthropology because it provides insight into a society's norms and values. Religion elucidates a people's *Weltanschauung*.

The substantive approach to studying religion focuses on the claims a religion makes as to the meaning and purpose of life. Examining religion through this method emphasizes the supernatural and spiritual aspects of belief systems, ideas which help people orient themselves and make sense of their world. As with the functionalist approach, religion is an externalization of humanity; however, the substantive approach also sees religion as giving order to life. Peter Berger sums up this view well: "Religion implies that human order is projected into the totality of being. Put differently, religion is the audacious attempt to conceive of the entire universe as being humanly significant."<sup>9</sup> The substantive approach to religion provides social scientists with a means of studying religion based on psychological and philosophical methods.

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<sup>8</sup> Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 421.

<sup>9</sup> Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1967), 28.

While the functional and substantive approaches examine the sociological and psychological aspects of religion, the phenomenological approach considers the forms of religion. This method attempts to describe religion based upon common characteristics found universally in all religions. Another name for this is the “delineational method.” This approach examines ubiquitous categories or archetypes and delineates a spectrum within each that accommodates the diverse practices found in religions. It also marks off boundaries to limit the naming of every philosophical thought and social practice a religion.

Religious studies scholar Ninian Smart offers a helpful nomenclature for describing and clarifying what constitutes religion in his work, *The Dimensions of the Sacred*. He utilizes a delineational method to study religion revealing general characteristics that exist between the various belief systems. This method provides Smart with key categories that are foundational to all religions and which must be present to be a sociologically *bona fide* religion. He lists seven criteria or dimensions without deference to order: doctrine, ritual, narrative, emotion, social, material, and ethical. The first six of these receive attention below. However, before examining these dimensions more closely, it is important to recognize that a delineational approach accommodates a broader interpretation of *religion* than many people mean when they use the term.

Religion commonly connotes ideas of belief systems and practices which attend to issues involving gods and goddesses, but this description is too limiting. Some traditionally defined religions, like Jainism and Buddhism, have no over-arching deity to which they pray or worship. The Dalai Lama makes this point emphatically when he



declares that Buddhists are atheists.<sup>10</sup> This does not mean they deny the existence of spiritual beings, but Buddhists worship none of these entities as the Supreme Being who intervenes in life by providing guidance or help.<sup>11</sup> They are secondary to the acolyte's endeavor to find liberation from karma.<sup>12</sup> In fact, many spiritual practitioners do not consider themselves participating in a religion at all, but instead self-identify as having a philosophy for the soul. Within American academics, these soul-centered philosophies are nonetheless viewed as religions whose academic study occurs within religion departments.

There are important consequences in recognizing that religion encompasses more than an acknowledgment and worship of deities. It permits a much broader interpretation of religion, potentially embraces any number of secular *-isms*, and expands the description of religion to allow for a re-categorization of beliefs that are non-theistic. If Jainism's and Buddhism's non-theistic beliefs appropriately exist under the rubric of religion, then other non-theistic systems and philosophies might also properly belong under the label of religion. If they meet the conditions set forth in these delineated categories that constitute religion, it is then appropriate to name them a religion.

Smart's delineational approach provides a helpful description of religion that embraces both spiritual and temporal views and practices. His purpose is not to re-assign ideological thought to the label of religion, but to "provide a realistic checklist of aspects

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<sup>10</sup> Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 27.

<sup>11</sup> Myrtle Langley, "Respect for All Life: Jainism," in *Eerdmans' Handbook to the World's Religions*, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1994), 212.

<sup>12</sup> Wulf Metz, "The Enlightened One: Buddhism," in *Eerdmans' Handbook*, 239, note 48.

of religion...[and] to give a kind of functional delineation of religions.”<sup>13</sup> Due to the breadth of his approach, Smart sometimes characterizes non-sacrosanct worldviews as religion, requiring him to differentiate between sacred and secular religions. However, Smart sees any belief system appropriately named a religion if it adheres to the recognized categories that he believes characterize religion.

Smart makes clear that the dimensions he proposes are both broad in scope and interconnected with each other. This means foremost for him that they are not ordinal or sequential categories but are better understood as independent groupings whose sums make up the whole. These various aspects interact with each other, but to varying degrees depending upon the belief system. Some dimensions overlap more with particular aspects while others appear to hardly bisect. They are also not equidimensional spheres. Religions emphasize each element differently and tolerate variations within each component. However, to be a religion according to the delineational approach, the system must participate in all of them at some level. The remainder of this chapter briefly examines Smart’s dimensions of religion, then applies them to the question of consumerism.

#### Philosophical or Doctrinal Dimension

Philosophical or doctrinal attributes are the sets of tenets and dogmas taught to members that create organization and uniqueness for a religion. They are the authoritative responses to the questions all belief systems attempt to answer: Why is the world a particular way? What is one to believe and how one is to behave in response to that belief? What is the human condition? Doctrines often arise out of intense internal

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<sup>13</sup> Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred*, 8-9.

conflicts concerning some cognitive incongruity, but they establish the criteria to distinguish between appropriate (orthodox) and inappropriate (heretical) thoughts and behaviors.

Doctrines also serve specific functions in the life of the adherent; they prescribe a comprehensive religious worldview.<sup>14</sup> They describe the human situation with both itself and the temporal and atemporal worlds. From this philosophical acumen, individuals learn the attitudes appropriate for a believer. These also provide an explication of the human condition and situation as well as form the defense for one's religious viewpoints. Doctrines are those religious principles that engender an "us-them" mentality. Unabated differences in doctrinal or philosophical beliefs draw the proverbial lines between inclusion and exclusion.

#### Ritual Dimension

Ritual is the dimension of religion that symbolizes deeper beliefs concerning the relationships between the temporal and utopian "other" worlds through specific words and actions. Ritual constitutes the applied practices of a belief system both at the individual and corporate levels "involving performative uses of language...and a formal pattern of behaviour either closely or more loosely followed."<sup>15</sup> Groups vary by religion and sect on how strictly they abide by ritual observances, and individual members' commitment to the rituals ranges from deliberate to perfunctory. Finally, rituals are often external, physical displays of convention; however, they can become spiritualized,

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 72.

allowing for and encouraging an internalized attitudinal compliance even beyond the outward expression.

Rituals provide a means of demonstrating one's commitment to the doctrines of a religion. There are no standardized practices that transcend all religions; many rituals revolve around "such activities as worship, meditation, pilgrimage, sacrifice, sacramental rites and healing activities."<sup>16</sup> In all rituals, language and behavior provide a testimony to the individual and the community regarding the member's dedication. Verbal language serves to remind or recall devotees to their religious fidelity through the religion's established words and phrases. The act of recitation declares an individual's allegiance to the religion and her or his camaraderie with the larger community of believers. Adherents also enact particular ceremonies or perform specific gestures that highlight devotion to the belief system. These physical expressions are affirmations to the community of the person's loyalty toward the religion. Even if many of the external exhibitions of ritual become internalized, the religion will still require some outward display to evidence an individual's devotion.

#### Narrative Dimension

Religious traditions always use narratives to inform the collective consciousness of those participating in the group. These religious stories "help define both groups and sacred entities and persons."<sup>17</sup> They teach about the characters, places, and virtues important to the religion and provide an account of the group's origins and eschaton. Narratives provide the contexts for how and why principal doctrines exist in a religion.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 132.

They also serve as the prototype for religion's rituals as these are re-enactments of key events described in the stories. Narratives provide a back story that allows divergent individuals to join into a more unified group and interpret daily life and future hopes through a particular belief-system's filter.

While individual religious narratives differ, Smart recognizes key themes which reoccur: space and time. Space is common in religious narratives, particularly the positive views of height and the negative views of the deep. Sacred locations are most often located physically or symbolically on an elevated plane. Jews *aliyah* (go up) to Jerusalem to worship. Heaven is above in the ethereal. The Greek gods lived on Mount Olympus. Religious narrative also transcends space, making use of the area beyond the physical universe. The same principles apply to time also. Specific past events gain sacred meaning which are then celebrated and re-enacted in future ritual observances. The narratives also extend outside of time. Religious stories provide accounts of the creation of the world, societies, and individuals (pre-time) and their completion or future utopian state (post-time).

#### Experiential Dimension

A broad experiential dimension also makes up a portion of every religion by providing opportunities for personal involvement. According to Smart, these may be numinous or contemplative experiences, largely dependent upon whether the religion is theistic or atheistic, respectively. It is important to state again that belief in a divine entity does not stand as the litmus test for defining religion; however, events and situations occur which lead individuals toward spiritual reflection. Sometimes these are spontaneous, naturally occurring events in life, and other times they are controlled,

premeditated experiences organized by the religion. Often spiritual reflection comes in cognitively challenging moments, and religious narrative is used to explain the experiences.

Just as frequently, experiences are emotional affairs fostered in the individual as a response to ritual. Such phenomena give believers the opportunities necessary to affect their lives, yet they also serve as catalysts to move a devotee closer toward the transcendental. Numinous or contemplative rituals and narratives enliven people to the religious experience. Although rituals can be performed automatically and narrative recited stiltedly, “so much of religious practice is soaked in emotions. Without them, the practice would be insincere, mechanical, merely external, not really worth undertaking.”<sup>18</sup> The purpose of participating in religious experiences is to inspire feelings of awe, fear, love, and loyalty among believers. The experiential dimension offers needed opportunities for adherents to encounter and respond to the sublime.

### Social Dimension

The social dimension of religion develops it into an organized community. Religions have an administrative structure that governs the rules and regulations they promulgate. This arrangement often approximates the pattern of the larger society in which a religion finds itself, especially when it is the dominant religion of society. For example, Catholicism’s hierarchical format resembles the monarchical model in which it developed, while Evangelical Protestantism is more autonomous owing to its beginnings in a democratic Western Europe and United States. When religions emulate the social and organizational structures of the larger empire or nation, conflation often occurs between

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 195.

religious affiliation and nationalism, leading many to see the two as synonymous. Nations are often associated with a particular religion and the religion affirms the State. Smart suggests they are so identical that “it is difficult for a religion to have embedded itself in the life of a people without acquiring a nationalistic flavour in the telling of the people’s story.”<sup>19</sup> Some religions do retain governing and organizational structures distinct from the larger national community; however, these usually find themselves as minority religions.<sup>20</sup>

Moving from the broad organizational structure of a religion to the micro level reveals the important social roles fulfilled by individuals and small groups. These are the particular jobs that maintain the organizational dimension of the religion and the various responsibilities connected with the other religious dimensions. They include individuals imbued with the greatest of religion’s authority and prestige—such as prophets and gurus—to the priests and imams who mediate the religious rituals. Theoretical specialists wrestle with and establish religion’s orthodox beliefs. Even the laity has a part to play in this aspect of religion both as participants in the rituals and contributors to the material dimension.

### Material Dimension

Religions all have some form of material. Like the previous dimensions of religion, the material aspect overlaps with the others to provide a complete whole.

Religious narrative, for example, not only names the key figures of a religion, but it also

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 257.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Bellah and Phillip Hammond argue that various religions have “for most of their histories been involved in uneasy and unhappy alliances with state power... The tendency [to Augustine and Rousseau’s tension between church and state] has been for every solution to break down into religion as the servant of the state or the state as the servant of religion.” *Varieties of Civil Religion* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1980), 6.

identifies the holy places and spaces of a religion. These sacred, physical spheres are also where rituals are performed, rituals which rely on and use corporeal objects. The materiality of religion also facilitates the experiential dimension. It engages the human senses by the smell of the incense or visual iconography. These serve to move people into an experience with the ethereal as well as worship their deities.

Religions vary on which materials they use and how they employ these materials; however, religions generally entail the same major categories of materiality: holy places, artistry, written mythos for literate cultures, and dress.<sup>21</sup> For Judaism, naturally occurring landmarks like mountains as well as humanly constructed places like Jerusalem and the Temple all have holy significance. Hindus have sculpted magnificent statues of their deities and decorated their temples ornately. Muslims revere the Qur'an as the exact words of Allah, memorizing portions of it, ceremonially washing before touching it, and never lowering it to the ground.<sup>22</sup> Shamanistic religions use particular dress and masks as part of ritualistic ceremonies. Regardless of how modern or ancient the religion, these dimensions appear in each.

### **Consumerism in Relation to Smart's Religious Dimensions**

It is necessary now to determine if and how consumerism complies with Smart's sociological dimensions of religion. The goal is to examine each category individually; however, they are highly permeable and spill into one another. This is a reminder, then, that the presentational order is variable and the dimensions receive differing emphases.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 277.

<sup>22</sup> Christy Wilson, "The Qur'an," in *Eerdmans' Handbook to the World's Religions*, 319, note 48.



Finally, the examples in each of the sections are sufficiently illustrative, but they are not exhaustive.

### Material Dimension

Perhaps the most recognizable dimension of consumerism is the material. Even though this study defines consumerism as appropriating products to affect people's spiritual, socio-psychological, or economic stations in life, consumption is about using material goods in order to satisfy needs and desires. Individuals' conspicuous consumption manifests itself via some tangible object in order that others may apprehend the status or affiliation they are demonstrating. Materiality concretely symbolizes the various other sociological dimensions while reoccurring in the same forms found in religion: holy places, artistry, written mythos, and dress.

The holy sites of consumerism are multi-million-dollar human constructs known as department stores and shopping centers. People from around the world make their way to these temples in order to participate in their rituals. With more people visiting these pilgrimage sites, there is a felt need to build more centers of consumerism. Based on data from 2010, there are approximately 107,770 shopping centers of all sizes in the United States.<sup>23</sup> By comparison, there were 98,817 public schools (elementary and secondary) in existence throughout the nation that same year.<sup>24</sup> The mall has become "the cathedral in

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<sup>23</sup> US Bureau of the Census, "Wholesale and Retail Trade," in *The 2012 Statistical Abstract*, 131st ed. (Washington, DC: 2012), 666, Table 1061, <http://www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/12statab/domtrade.pdf> (accessed July 5, 2013).

<sup>24</sup> US Department of Education, National Center for Educational Statistics, "All Levels of Education," *Digest of Education Statistics: 2011*, Table 5, [http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d12/tables/dt12\\_005.asp](http://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d12/tables/dt12_005.asp) (access July 5, 2013).

this new religion, the sacred space for a ‘universal’ faith with a distinct spirit.”<sup>25</sup> New shopping center constructions need to be grander and more exotic to better provide for individuals’ personal experiential opportunities.

The controlled experiences of consumerism imitate the naturally occurring topographical sacred places of many religions. Holy mountains and sacramental waters now exist in malls, only with their wildness domesticated for the customer. The glory of the numinous is captured and forced to obey humanity. Winter sports enthusiasts are no longer subjected to nature’s whims; shoppers can ski and ice skate at the mall under pristine conditions. Beach and amusement park goers can play without fear of chill, sunburn, or rain in the environmentally controlled confines of the mall. These temples of consumption are the sacred locales where rituals take place, doctrine is observed, and people participate in experiential consumerism.

Architectural artistry is another reoccurring motif in the material dimension of religions which finds its counterpart in the design of shopping centers. Modern malls and stores are not only functional, but they are also aesthetic structures designed to lead people’s thoughts toward the numinous. Although traditionally built from brick, newer shopping centers and remodeling projects include façades like archways and colonnades at the outside entrances, skylights that provide more natural lighting in the corridors, and brightly illuminated, glass storefronts revealing the goods inside.<sup>26</sup> Fountains and vegetation adorn the passageways while carousels or aquariums congregate shoppers

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<sup>25</sup> Jon Pahl, *Shopping Malls and Other Sacred Spaces* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos, 2003), 70-71.

<sup>26</sup> Anthony Lawler states that “consciousness molds architectural form through a fundamental pattern of thinking—desire, search, and find. Architecture externalizes this expedition of consciousness in the archetypal forms of gate, path, and lotus seat.” *The Temple in the House* (New York: Putnam’s Sons, 1994), 15. Lawler’s themes coincide with how architects lay out shopping centers: people enter in (gate) to seek and explore (path) until they finally attain their goal (lotus seat).

toward the middle of the mall for the spectacle. Smaller department stores may not use the same decorations as their larger counterparts, but they still focus on the emotional draw created by the artistry of architecture.

Not only do shopping centers display artistry through their construction and ornamentation, but artistry also occurs in all forms of advertisements. Commercials and print circulars use visual cues, colors, and symbols to convey their messages much the same ways that other art forms do. Although many consider such propaganda pedestrian, this does not make it any less artistic. Meticulous care goes into most advertisements to make sure consumers know how the product promotes a philosophy of consumerism, and only concomitantly what the product does. This explains why there is a lack of product content in most Super Bowl commercials despite companies paying an average of \$3.75 million for their 30 second advertisement spot.<sup>27</sup> Advertisements like these are artistic interpretations of the doctrinal truths of consumerism, and as with any good art, they resonate with people by generating emotional connections and conversation.

Within the material dimension, an emphasis also exists on the written form to disseminate the messages of consumerism. Companies send catalogs directly to residences to show potential customers the goods available for purchase. Advertisements make up large percentages of magazine content,<sup>28</sup> and billboards sprawl their messages across skylines and landscapes. There are also weekly mailers from local stores and the

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<sup>27</sup> Stuart Elliott, "Super Bowl Commercial Time Is a Sellout," *New York Times*, January 8, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/09/business/media/a-sellout-for-super-bowl-commercial-time.html> (accessed July 5, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> An informal survey of various periodicals showed advertisements constituted anywhere from 23% in the *New York Times* to 63% in *Vogue* magazine of the periodicals total number of pages. Science Club, "Magazine Advertising," *Cockeyed.com*, December 29, 2002, <http://www.cockeyed.com/science/advertising/advertising.html> (accessed July 5, 2013).

Sunday newspaper has a separate advertisement section revealing that week's sales and new available items. Each of these forms of advertising not only uses visual stimuli to convey messages but the written word as well. Print provides one means of materially communicating consumerism.

2010 was a watershed for new approaches of employing the written form without traditional, paper-based materials. The shift has been a steady move toward user-specific electronic or virtual information designed with the customer in mind. Websites like Groupon and AmazonLocal regularly send subscribers offers and discounts to nearby attractions and businesses via e-mail. Telephone apps assist people by sending up-to-the-minute auction statuses, coupons for the stores where they are shopping, and directions for getting both to and around major malls. Reuters reported that in 2010 "online readership and advertising revenue...surpassed that of print newspapers,"<sup>29</sup> while e-commerce made up forty-eight percent of total merchandise sales in 2009.<sup>30</sup> The materials used for the written word may change, but the written form is still important for this dimension.

The material category of dress finds particular relevance in societal stratification. The clothes people wear reveal their role or position within the communal framework. Divisions of status based upon clothing have always existed in society. The wealthy wear different clothing than the middle class, who wear different clothing than the working class. The clothing people wear "can serve not only to constitute and communicate a position in the social order, but it might also challenge positions of relative power within

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<sup>29</sup> Jennifer Saba, "Online Readership and Ad Revenue Overtake Newspapers," *Reuters.com*, March 14, 2011, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2011/03/14/us-media-readership-idUSTRE72D0WC20110314> (accessed July 5, 2013).

<sup>30</sup> US Bureau of the Census, "Wholesale and Retail Trade," 663, Table 1056.

it.”<sup>31</sup> Since specific social cliques in society identify themselves through styles, particular groups like the punk or LGBT movements use fashion to rebel against the status quo.

Dress serves as an outward announcement of a group’s inner social critique.

The communicative element of clothing transitions easily into the ritual theme of branding. The attire a person wears demonstrates, on the individual level, his or her association with a particular lifestyle choice represented through a particular logo.

Clothes, shoes, and other accoutrements reflect people’s tastes and loyalties as well as distinguish them from the crowd.<sup>32</sup> Owning an authentic Chanel outfit or a Louis Vuitton handbag illustrates particular affiliations which differ from those who wear a Ramones shirt and a pair of Converse Chuck Taylors. In this approach to understanding the role of dress, it is not about wealth or status but about lifestyle choices and self expression. The clothing may have originally signified something different before it was branded as an image of an individual’s tastes.<sup>33</sup>

### Social Dimension

Consumerism has a social dimension that reveals the roles and responsibilities of key groups that contribute to its operation. These include advertisers and marketers, economists, politicians and the upper management of business, and the general populous of consumers. Although these four groups are distinct from one another, they each have

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<sup>31</sup> Steven Miles, *Consumerism: As a Way of Life* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 1998), 98.

<sup>32</sup> Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998), 57-58.

<sup>33</sup> This happens frequently to music groups with anti-establishment lyrics who find themselves appreciated by the mainstream. The individuals who wear the band’s album covers on shirts rarely believe (or understand in the case of most six and seven year olds) the messages being sung; instead, they want to be known as liking today’s popular music.

an influence on one another. They also have an impact on the structural organization of consumerism.

In religious terms, advertisers are the evangelists and missionaries of consumerism. They promote the doctrines of consumerism, wrapping them up and sharing them with society. During the first six months of 2011, the advertising industry spent \$71.5 billion to promote consumerism through their products and branding strategies.<sup>34</sup> The advertisers' task is to help society recognize the importance of consumerism's rituals and encourage them to participate in them. They also market the material products manufacturers and management create in order to convey the principle of consumerism. Advertisers stand as the mediators of consumption, retelling the old narratives in fresh and new ways in order to maintain the system.

Economists are another important segment because they create the apologia for consumerism. They wrestle with and try to make sense of consumerism's doctrinal paradoxes and incongruencies. They develop new theories and interpretations of the consumeristic numinous in order to point society toward the path of the glorious future good life. It is the logic and wisdom of economists that explain to politicians and the public the purpose of the rituals. Economists stand as the mouthpiece of consumerism, declaring either blessings or curses based upon economic behavior.

Another key group in the social dimension is the politicians and business management who often work together within the bounds of the law. This study refers to such partnerships as *confederacies*. These include all local and state government officials

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<sup>34</sup> "Kantar Media Reports U.S. Advertising Expenditures Increased 3.2% in the First Half of 2011," *Kantar Media*, September 12, 2011, <http://kantarmediana.com/intelligence/press/us-advertising-expenditures-increased-32-first-half-2011> (accessed July 5, 2013).

who grant political favors to business owners and the companies who support such officials. Federal politicians who grant government contracts to former and future business colleagues also belong in this category.<sup>35</sup> These two parties lend veracity to consumerism through their power and authority. Using this clout, they implement and experiment with economists' theories deciding how and where to spread consumerism. Confederacies bear the burden of advancing a society's standard of living.

The general populous also has a vital role in the social aspect of consumerism. It is the masses who have the obligation to participate in the economists' plans laid out by the confederacy in order to help bring about the utopian society. Consumers owe it to themselves, to their neighbors, to their country, and even to the world, to engage in appropriate consumptive behaviors. In an interconnected world, the theory is that goods purchased from poorer nations provide the latter with jobs and money. Increasing their wealth allows them to participate in consumer society which raises their standards of living. In the economists' wealth generation plan, large numbers of consumers are required to spend their money. However, this same group of people is most affected when aberrations occur in the schema because they have saved so little.<sup>36</sup>

#### Philosophical or Doctrinal Dimension

Consumerism provides a unified philosophy for approaching life by producing a common *raison d'être* across the global human community. The purpose of life, according to consumerism's doctrine, is for individuals to become members of a common

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<sup>35</sup> Klein, *Shock Doctrine*, 389-408. Klein details this idea of a revolving door between politicians and businesses in chapter fifteen of her book.

<sup>36</sup> Christine Jenkins, "Now Over One In Four Americans Has No Money Saved For the Future," *Business Insider*, February 3, 2011, <http://www.businessinsider.com/over-one-in-four-americans-now-has-no-money-saved-for-future-2011-2#> (accessed July 5, 2013).

society through savvy consumption. This message transcends ethnicity, social class, race, religious affiliations, and global locations. Authors such as Thomas Friedman are so bold as to claim that consumerism and the growth of these desires to consume will prevent international conflicts and violence.<sup>37</sup> Political ideologies and cultural differences are means of fostering divisive rifts even in small communities. The call for continual consumption, however, informs participants of what life ought to be. The quintessential human experience revolves around obtaining the lifestyle that an individual deserves but does not possess except through buying and shopping.

One tenet of consumerism's over-arching theme declares that life is currently unsatisfying. Television commercials, magazine advertisements, and billboards all show smiling, happy people whose contentment derives from the featured products. Whether they are revealing intimate love by portraying the gift of jewelry or the camaraderie of friends drinking beer, advertisements not only sell their product but consumerism's doctrine: happiness looks like this. These same marketing tools also teach individuals that much of life feels monotonous and emotionally mediocre, even while it is not necessarily unpleasant. When commercials show people working, cleaning, and fulfilling other familial obligations, these activities serve as foils to what consumerism defines as personal happiness. By constantly repeating a particular image of the good life, daily living changes to despair as individuals compare themselves to those more fortunate

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<sup>37</sup> Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree*, 248-275, "The Golden Arches Theory of Conflict Prevention."



people who embody consumerism.<sup>38</sup>

This dogma drives the advertising industry as well as economic theory in consumerism. Advertisements show particular types of people: the rich, the famous, the powerful, and the beautiful. They wear clothing that accentuates their looks, or they drive cars that reveal their wealth. Commercials serve to educate and remind viewers that they have not yet achieved all of the luxury and goodness deserved. Economists also teach this philosophy via a financial angle, and it is a lesson well learned. While roughly twenty percent of the world's population lives on less than \$1.25 a day,<sup>39</sup> many Americans feel "poor" compared to fellow citizens. This has led to a mental shift for an increasing number of college freshmen regarding their goals in life. While previous generations of incoming students sought to develop a "meaningful philosophy for life," recent polls of this group find financial well-being as a very important or essential aspiration for life.<sup>40</sup> In the wealthiest nation in the world, people are encouraged to compare themselves to the smallest fraction of the world's population to remain dissatisfied with their lives and situations.

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<sup>38</sup> Hannah Arendt offers an intriguing explanation for why people's desire to consume remains unsatiated even when they stand as the symbols of the consumerist lifestyle: humanity has misunderstood its condition in *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1958). "The human condition is such that pain and effort are not just symptoms which can be removed without changing life itself; they are rather the modes in which life itself, together with the necessity to which it is bound, makes itself felt. For mortals, the 'easy life of the gods' would be a lifeless life" (120). People must labor, work, and be active. A life revolving around shopping, buying, and using goods is the result of leisure time. Arendt holds that, "the spare time of the *animal laborans* is never spent in anything but consumption, and the more time left to him, the greedier and more craving his appetites" (133). The shift in societal conditions (increases in free time, wealth, and goods to consume) does not alter what she sees as the fundamental activities of human beings: labor, work, and action.

<sup>39</sup> The World Bank, "Poverty & Equity Data: Global Poverty Indicators," *The World Bank*, 2011, <http://povertydata.worldbank.org/poverty/home/> (accessed July 5, 2013).

<sup>40</sup> Erik Assadourian, "The Rise and Fall of Consumer Cultures," in *2010 State of the World*, ed. Linda Starke and Lisa Mastny (New York: Norton, 2010), 10, Figure 2.

Another philosophical proposition of consumerism is that our bodies are simply not good enough as they are. This ranges in everything from having too much or too little hair to inferior sexual performance. Individuals need to change. Theologian John Kavanaugh sees media making people aware that “one’s own body, like that of one’s partner, is continually portrayed as hopelessly, disgustingly inadequate, marred by lumps and acne, scarred with stretch marks and age spots.”<sup>41</sup> Even tabloids promote this by capturing photographs of alleged Hollywood beauties and beaus with exposed cellulite, unkempt hair, and blemished faces. Body image means everything in consumerist society, but it is specifically a look that does not come naturally. While a body may fall short of perfection, there are products available to help overcome these deficiencies.

One final doctrinal tenet to mention is the utopian vision of a global society that consumerism provides. Spokespeople from the social dimension posit that consumerism benefits everyone, not merely a few. The United Nations’ *Human Development Report: 1998* concurs: “Consumption clearly contributes to human development when it enlarges the capabilities of people without adversely affecting the well-being of others...and when it encourages the emergence of lively and creative communities.”<sup>42</sup> Increased consumption on a global scale becomes the impetus that increases standards of living for all people. It is the solution for eradicating global poverty as well as the universal philosophy for promoting world peace.

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<sup>41</sup> Kavanaugh, *Following Christ in a Consumer Society*, 62.

<sup>42</sup> United Nations Development Program, *Human Development Report: 1998* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 38, [http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/hdr\\_1998\\_en\\_chap2.pdf](http://hdr.undp.org/en/media/hdr_1998_en_chap2.pdf) (accessed July 5, 2013).

## Narrative Dimension

Consumerism offers a narrative explaining human life, its values, and its goals. It explains to people who they are and how they can become what they want to be. Its stories also identify the important places and people. In terms of Thorstein Veblen's sociological theory, consumerism's narratives educate all members of society in how to behave and what to possess if any aspire to the leisure class. In common parlance, they identify the "in-crowd" from the rabble, the "haves" from the "have-nots."

Consumerism's narratives remind individuals of what it means to belong and who possesses celebrity status within such groups. Consumerists learn this through the mediums of advertising and economic theory.

Advertising provides society with a secular framework to help it understand itself. Tricia Sheffield describes it as "the divine mediator." Advertising functions as the means of knowing the divine, but it also provides a form of salvation from life. It offers the "revelation and reconciliation" necessary for consumer society to become right with or maintain righteousness toward the numinous. Individuals are alienated from their purpose and need a means of returning. According to Sheffield, advertising fulfills this need: "By the conjoining of subject and object through the act of consuming the advertisement and purchasing the product, consumerism and the individual are reconciled, until, of course, the object loses its salvific luster and the process is repeated with a new advertisement and a new object."<sup>43</sup> Thirty-second television commercials offer more than product information or humorous anecdotes; they present the stories of our heroes and the high places that reunite us with our purpose in life.

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<sup>43</sup> Sheffield, *The Religious Dimensions of Advertising*, 106-107.

Consumerism's narrative is also told by economists who offer a different set of stories regarding human well-being. Their contribution to the narrative stresses the role each person plays in ushering in the ideal society. When individuals buy products, their demand creates more jobs which in turn create more consumable goods. This has the effect of generating more wealth and raising the standard of living both locally and globally. Economists recount the stories of visionaries like Henry Ford and Steve Jobs who have ushered society into the consumerist era. Great pioneers like these have blessed society not only by their innovations, but also through the direct job growth and the indirect market competition they created. Economists also cite the foils of consumerism whose examples must be shunned. These stories describe those who tried to restrain or fight consumerism in political and economic battles, but who lost to its great renown.

Within the narrative framework, economists use the theme of space to chronicle society's proximity to the good life. The stock market being "up" and a healthy economy as "growing" or "robust" connect the ideas of height and largeness with good. Such spatial language is similar to religions for which "the symbol of heaven is almost universal, and points to the desires of human beings to reach the highest goal, the top, the supreme."<sup>44</sup> The association of height equating a good is implicit in the English language; the question is whether economic words and concepts express the limitations of the language or have economists thoughtfully chosen descriptive terms recognizing their correspondence with religious values?

Space is also important in relation to consumerism's holy sites, especially malls and shopping centers. These huge edifices, whose construction emphasize height as well

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<sup>44</sup> Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred*, 140.

as breadth, rise into the skyline and consume blocks of city streets. The largest of them measure their area in the millions of square feet. Minnesota's Mall of America, not even one of the top ten largest shopping complexes in the world, boasts that "258 Statues of Liberty or seven New York Yankee stadiums could fit inside the mall."<sup>45</sup> The scale of these structures is massive, but the creative use of space inside shopping centers resembles a heaven. Customers are never uncomfortable because the stores are climate controlled. They import trees and water to simulate the natural world while playing music softly in the background to soothe anxious customers. Malls are also spacious, offering large aisles and walkways to avoid feelings of crowdedness. These conditions parallel descriptions of paradise found in other religions.

The theme of time is a paradox in the narrative of consumerism, particularly in relation to the experiential dimension. When necessary, stores are convenient centers to obtain all of one's needs quickly and efficiently. Time is precious, so shopping should not interfere or inhibit a person's schedule. On other occasions, however, shopping is a leisurely activity when friends meet and spend time with one another. From a structural perspective, time is indefinable inside retail complexes. While many malls have skylights, they lack windows apart from the entrance doors. The amount of lighting rarely fluctuates in stores regardless of the time of day or night.<sup>46</sup> Neither are there changes of seasons. Winter, spring, summer, or fall, stores maintain roughly the same temperature year round. Time at the store, just like time in paradise, is indeterminable.

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<sup>45</sup> Mall of America, "Mall of America by the Numbers," <http://mallofamerica.com/about/moa/facts> (accessed July 5, 2013).

<sup>46</sup> Paco Underhill, *Why We Buy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1999), 45.

## Ritual Dimension

The enactment of consumerism's specific doctrinal beliefs and narrative stories create its ritual dimension. These express a personal commitment to its doctrines, provide fellowship with others, and offer adherents opportunities with the numinous through their experiences. There are three rituals common in consumerism that symbolically bring people into closer communion. The first is pilgrimage, a religious journey to those places deemed most hallowed by a religion. The next is shopping and more specifically, buying. Participating in this means more than supplying life's necessities, but partaking in the consumerist lifestyle. Last, is the rite of branding. Here consumers express their tastes and predilections through their loyalty to a product or company.

Like other religions that have holy sites that people make pilgrimages to, consumerism has its own hallowed bastions to which the faithful sojourn: the mall. These are found in most medium-sized cities across the United States and larger cities throughout the world. Malls receive millions of visitors each year, with many of the larger complexes having developed tourist packages to bring people there from surrounding areas. Pilgrims from all around the world visit the largest megamalls in surprising numbers. The Mall of America in Bloomington, Minnesota, boasts forty million visitors annually,<sup>47</sup> perhaps the highest population of any mall in North or South America. The West Edmonton Mall in Alberta, Canada claims a yearly visitor rate of close to thirty-one million people.<sup>48</sup> China, a country with over four times more people than the US, expects to have seven of the ten largest malls in the world in the next few

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<sup>47</sup> Mall of America.

<sup>48</sup> West Edmonton Mall, "Facts about West Edmonton Mall," <http://www.wem.ca/#/about-wem/facts> (accessed July 5, 2013).

years.<sup>49</sup> To give some perspective of consumers' mall attendance, the Mall of the Emirates, Dubai's second largest mall, had over thirty-one million visitors in 2010,<sup>50</sup> ten times more than the number of pilgrims who attended the annual Islamic hajj to Mecca that same year.<sup>51</sup>

Of the millions of visitors malls receive each year, most individuals are not shopping for anything in particular; going to the mall is a ceremony. People are there simply because it is the mall.<sup>52</sup> While one poll notes that shopping is the number one activity for the majority of American teenage girls,<sup>53</sup> shopping centers serve as social gathering spots for many tweens, teens, and adults. Going to the mall demonstrates an individual's affiliation with their respective social group.

However, shopping itself is also a ritual.<sup>54</sup> There exists no greater display of this than Thanksgiving weekend which includes Black Friday and Cyber Monday, the shopping holidays following Thanksgiving. The five day event stands as the holiest of days for consumerists as it offers many of the year's best sales on consumer goods. For

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<sup>49</sup> David Barboza, "China, New Land of Shoppers, Builds Malls on Gigantic Scale," *New York Times*, May 25, 2005, <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/25/business/worldbusiness/25mall.html?pagewanted=all> (accessed July 5, 2013).

<sup>50</sup> Mall of the Emirates, "About Mall of the Emirates," <http://www.malloftheemirates.com/MOE/En/MainMenu/AboutMOE/tabid/64/Default.aspx> 2010, (accessed July 5, 2013).

<sup>51</sup> Glen Carey and Mourad Haroutunian, "Hajj Spells Contracts for Companies as Pilgrims Flock to Mecca," *Bloomberg*, November 16, 2010, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2010-11-15/hajj-spells-contracts-for-companies-as-pilgrims-flock-to-saudi-holy-cities.html> (accessed July 5, 2013).

<sup>52</sup> Steven Chase, "The Rise of the Mall in Brazil," *The Globe and Mail*, September 2, 2011, <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/report-on-business/international-news/latin-american/the-rise-of-the-mall-in-brazil/article2150882/> (accessed July 5, 2013).

<sup>53</sup> John de Graaf, David Wann, and Thomas H Naylor, *Affluenza* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2002), 15.

<sup>54</sup> Gary Gardner, "Ritual and Taboo as Ecological Guardians," in Starke and Mastny, *2010 State of the World*, 33.

years, the desire to get the best deals from retailers has trumped America's national day to give thanks. People would give up time with family and friends early Thursday evening to go and stand in line for hours (sometimes days!) in order to demonstrate love by buying presents for many of the same people they left behind in order to make the purchases. The ritual culminates in a shopping frenzy that occasionally leads to violence.<sup>55</sup>

2012 marked the beginning of what will likely be a new shopping tradition. For the first time, Thanksgiving Day "may have drawn more shoppers than Black Friday," with thirty percent of Americans reporting that they shopped either online or in stores that day.<sup>56</sup> Many individuals avoid the physical struggle of shopping on Black Friday weekend and choose to participate via the internet. From 2011 to 2012, the number of people who shopped online rose twenty-six percent with "fifty-seven million Americans [visiting] online retail sites on Black Friday" and spending over one billion dollars.<sup>57</sup> Cyber Monday, the first day at work after the Thanksgiving holiday, saw the most profitable online shopping day ever in 2012, yielding nearly two billion dollars in sales

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<sup>55</sup> In 2011, a woman pepper sprayed fellow customers at a Wal-Mart in Los Angeles, while others throughout the country were robbed at gun point. In West Virginia, Target customers not only ignored an elderly gentleman who collapsed, but stepped over his body. Perhaps the most notorious incident occurred in 2008 when customers trampled a Wal-Mart employee to death in Long Island, NY.

<sup>56</sup> Jessica Wohl, "Thanksgiving Drew More Shoppers than Black Friday," *Reuters*, December 5, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/12/05/usa-retail-holiday-poll-idUSL1E8N46OK20121205> (accessed July 5, 2013).

<sup>57</sup> "Black Friday Billion," *ComScore*, November 25, 2012, [http://www.comscore.com/Insights/Press\\_Releases/2012/11/Black\\_Friday\\_Billion\\_Kick-Off\\_to\\_Brick-and-Mortar\\_Shopping\\_Season\\_Surges\\_Past\\_1\\_Billion\\_in\\_E-Commerce\\_Spending\\_for\\_the\\_First\\_Time](http://www.comscore.com/Insights/Press_Releases/2012/11/Black_Friday_Billion_Kick-Off_to_Brick-and-Mortar_Shopping_Season_Surges_Past_1_Billion_in_E-Commerce_Spending_for_the_First_Time) (accessed July 5, 2013).



and bringing the total number of people shopping that weekend to 247 million.<sup>58</sup> Analysts estimate that consumers spent a total of fifty-nine billion dollars during the five-day Thanksgiving celebration in 2012.<sup>59</sup>

Another of consumerism's rituals is a process known as branding. Branding occurs when corporations focus on selling themselves as the embodiment of a lifestyle rather than the quality or usefulness of their products. In Benjamin Barber's definition of branding, goods are gradually estranged from "the specific content of the products and services [corporations] label and [are] reaffiliated with styles, sentiments, and emotions at best remotely linked to those products and services."<sup>60</sup> Nike and Apple have accomplished this with their corporate names, immersing individuals into a perceived lifestyle based upon tastes and preferences rather than the actual goods. Once branded, an individual offers commitment to the company's label, a loyalty based on the brand-name rather than any of its actual products. In essence, it is an initiation into a particular consumer fraternity.

The last ritual is the symbolic representation. Corporate marketing campaigns use celebrities and mascots to provide the general population with personas with whom they can identify. The personalities in these advertisements are not hawking wares so much as associating their names (which are often branded) with a corporation's for consumers to connect the two. People do not honestly believe that they will become a pop star by

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<sup>58</sup> Schuyler Velasco, "Cyber Monday, Black Friday Sales Strong," *Christian Science Monitor*, November 27, 2012, <http://www.csmonitor.com/Business/2012/1127/Cyber-Monday-Black-Friday-sales-strong.-Do-they-matter> (accessed July 5, 2013).

<sup>59</sup> "Black Friday Weekend Sales Estimated at \$59.1 Billion," *Fox Business News*, November 26, 2012, <http://www.foxbusiness.com/industries/2012/11/26/black-friday-weekend-sales-estimated-at-51b/> (accessed July 5, 2013).

<sup>60</sup> Benjamin Barber, *Consumed* (New York: Norton, 2007), 174.

purchasing a celebrity-endorsed perfume. Instead, buying the product establishes an affiliation with the star's predilections. A car is more than means of traveling from point A to point B; owning a Chrysler illustrates one's association with the embodiment of Eminem: grit, attitude, and success.<sup>61</sup>

### Experiential Dimension

The experiences a person enjoys in consumerism form another recognizable dimension. While the experiential dimension occurs in multiple ways, they are divisible into two themes: physicality and emotionality. The first are tangible encounters with consumerism often via the ritual and material dimensions. The second plays on the inner feelings and connections that take place in people's lives. This bifurcation of the experiential dimension occurs as events arise spontaneously for the participants in consumerism, but they are often predicted responses to controlled stimuli.

The truth is that people enjoy the physical experiences of consumerism. The feel of a new outfit or the visual stimulation of a new television exhilarates the senses. Designers intentionally fashion the materiality of merchandise with the hope of affecting shoppers. It is tactilely pleasing and aesthetically charming. Manufacturers spend thousands of dollars researching ways to make goods more appealing, and retailers attempt to discover the high-traffic locations to place those products.<sup>62</sup> The design of the store also contributes to the shopping ritual through its use of décor and lighting. The décor provides cues for how to use the product and the lighting makes it easier to see the

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<sup>61</sup> Craig Trudell, "Chrysler Taps Eminem's 8 Mile for 'Buzz': Cars," *Bloomberg*, October 10, 2012, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2012-10-10/chrysler-taps-eminem-s-8-mile-for-buzz-cars.html> (accessed July 5, 2013).

<sup>62</sup> Paco Underhill, *Call of the Mall* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 18.

merchandise.<sup>63</sup> Shopping combines the material and ritual dimensions into a sensation-filled experience.

There is also an emotional element to experiential consumption in the form of shopping. Casual shopping relieves the stress of a hectic routine through “retail therapy.” In this event, the items are meaningless to the buyer; it is the buying itself that brings exhilaration. During consumerism’s holidays like Black Friday and the Christmas season, competitive shopping drives people. Their excitement comes not so much from the product, but the emotional thrill of competing against so many other people. Customers note the adrenaline rush and euphoria they have after obtaining a prized sale item, while those who lose out on the deeply discounted items express disappointment. However, they assuage their sorrows by finding other, lesser deals.

While shopping exemplifies one form of emotionality in the experiential dimension, gifts reveal another. Advertising constantly repeats the idea that giving and receiving manufactured goods are expressions of love, acceptance, self-confidence, and power. These items gain emotional importance and treasured status less because of their cost and more for their sentimental value. The object is meaningful due solely to the circumstances and relationships that engendered its giving. The material substance becomes a physical embodiment of the relationship, while the emotional feelings join together in the experience.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 177-178.

<sup>64</sup> Daniel Miller, views “material objects...as an integral and inseparable aspect of all relationships. People exist for us and through their material presence.” *The Comfort of Things* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2008), 286. He supports this perspective by offering thirty diverse “portraits” of individuals who told their relationship stories through the “things” they retain and display.

### **Consumerism as a Religion**

The question remains, “Is religion an appropriate name for consumerism?” In order to be a religion in the most comprehensive sense, consumerism needs to be more than a guiding life principle or the foil for another established religion. It needs to fulfill, in its own right, the various dimensions that, when placed together, constitute religion. Smart’s specific delineational criteria offer a descriptive account of religion that affords consumerism a place within the boundaries of religion—at least in six of his categories. It adheres to the aggregate forms that constitute religion. It not only has guiding principles that distinguish it from other philosophies and doctrines, but it also provides a vision of what life can be like. The stories of consumerism describe this utopian “good life,” narrating tales that recount the various important people, places, and experiences found within it. Consumerism is replete with rituals that showcase individuals’ loyalty through spontaneous and deliberate acts. These move people closer to consumerism’s core doctrine while assuring that there are social positions and responsibilities for everyone acclimating to the religion. All of this forms together within materiality.

Based on these six criteria, it is appropriate to view consumerism as a religion as it conforms to the descriptive criteria of religion. However, Smart also posits that all religions have an ethical or legal dimension. This concerns the guiding principle(s) of a religion, and consumerism must fulfill this dimension in order to fully name consumerism a religion in terms of Smart’s categories. While consumerism has no written codex from which to glean its ethical more, examining the behaviors and attitudes found in its practice depicts the value that animates consumerism. The next chapter

examines a number of activities and practices that result from the overarching ethic of consumerism.

## CHAPTER THREE

### AN ETHIC OF CONSUMERISM

As goods increase,  
so do those who consume them.  
And what benefit are they to the owner  
except to feast his eyes on them.  
—Ecclesiastes 5:11<sup>1</sup>

Chapter two examined six of Ninian Smart's dimensions of religion and provided a framework for elucidating those phenomenological aspects of every religion. These included a material dimension; ritual practices; experience; a doctrinal belief system; narratives; and a social dimension. Using this rubric, the previous chapter demonstrated how consumerism aptly fits within Smart's delineational approach of describing religion. Smart mentions one additional facet which the previous chapter did not adequately address: the ethical dimension.

Every religion espouses some form of moral behavior disclosing how its followers ought to live. This ethical dimension expresses which actions and attitudes are virtuous or vile, right or wrong, good or bad. The ethical dimension provides the rationale and the motivation for individuals and groups to act in appropriately sanctioned ways and avoid actions which are not. At times these ethical codes become norms which obtain formal, legalistic status like Islamic *Sharia* and Jewish kosher requirements, and at other times they emphasize an inward attitudinal compliance as found in the teachings of the

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<sup>1</sup> All biblical citations are from The Holy Bible, New International Version. Copyright 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society unless otherwise noted.

Buddha or Jesus.<sup>2</sup> Neither the law-abiding nor the inner-attitude approaches necessarily establish more devotion from an acolyte than the other; instead, each counsels an individual toward living the ethical ideals of a religion.

To aptly place consumerism within the category of religion by way of Smart's descriptive approach, it must have a discernable ethic. Unlike some religions, consumerism does not have a written text that expresses its ethical mores. However, the lack of a sacred text does not mean it lacks guiding moral principles, goals, and virtues. Historically, many belief systems have communicated their faith through oral storytelling rather than through writing. Consumerism operates similarly. It emphasizes the visual stimuli of media to teach followers how they ought to live. Like other religions, people observe these teachings in different and sometimes contradictory ways.

The ethic of consumerism is one of self-defined happiness through consuming. This chapter explains what it means to say that personal happiness through consumption is the best way to describe the ethic of consumerism. It begins by detailing how an individual's consumption can function as an expression of personhood. The act of buying and consuming has the ability to promote characteristics associated with being a person. These include the opportunity for self-identification, the liberty of choice, a right to personal convictions, and an act of volition.<sup>3</sup> Next, the chapter explores ways a life given to consumerism impacts the environment, focusing on pollution and depletion of natural resources. It concludes by examining how people's self-defined happiness through

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<sup>2</sup> The categories "religions of acts" and "religions of attitude" are not nuanced descriptions of these faith traditions. Rather, the categories indicate the emphasis each religion gives to external or internal affairs.

<sup>3</sup> Amartya Sen names very similar traits as aspects that permit individuals to be "fuller social persons" including freedom, exercising volition, and influencing the world. *Development as Freedom* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1999), 15.

consuming shapes their attitudes toward society, particularly as this ethic affects ideas of privatization and the common good.

As explained in chapter one, consumerism means those acts of consumption, intentional or otherwise, that strive toward some economic, sociological, or religious telos. Not all consumption is consumerism, nor are all of the practices of consumption necessarily consumeristic.

### **Consumerism and Personhood**

This section explores four ways in which the ethic of consumerism promotes behaviors and attitudes that express personhood. The first way focuses on how individuals use consumption to shape and define their identity. The goods they buy become symbols and personal expressions of their values and beliefs—representations of who they are or want to be. The next way examines how people exercise personal choice through consumerism. When people have a variety of items available to buy, consumers experience the need to decide between alternatives. The third way consumerism expresses personhood is by the association people make with companies that share their beliefs. Finally, this section concludes with a look at personal volition through incidental, but fortuitous, partnerships between buyer and manufacturer, as when the former helps the latter support a third-party, charitable organization.

### **Consumerism and Identity**

Developing and signaling identity via consumption is a reflection of an individual's personality. Those who practice so-called “identity consumption” use the items they buy as a means of displaying who they are—both to themselves and others. The consumptive choices that people make allow “ever more trivial decisions [to]



become identity relevant because they can be read by others as indicators of what kind of person one is or aspires to be.”<sup>4</sup> Purchases create distinctiveness. In other words, objects communicate a person’s identity.

Displaying personhood through consumptive choices coincides with Thorstein Veblen’s theory of conspicuous consumption. Veblen posits that humanity engages in particular consumptive practices as a way of demonstrating status and association within society. A key purpose of consuming beyond physical necessity is to exhibit standing within a particular societal group. For Veblen, the conspicuous consumer’s motive is “a wish to conform to established usage, to avoid unfavorable notice and comment, to live up to the accepted canons of decency in the kind, amount, and grade of goods consumed....”<sup>5</sup> Veblen emphasizes conspicuous consumption as a social phenomenon that testifies to one’s prestige within the community.

In Veblen’s model, people’s consumption is both conditioned by and indicative of their society. Individuals shape their consumption to evince the socially accepted notions of luxury and decency. Personal tastes are shaped by the standards of the leisure class elite which “stands at the head of the social structure in point of reputability; and its manner of life and its standards of worth therefore afford the norm of reputability for the community. The observance of these standards, in some degree of approximation, becomes incumbent upon all classes lower in the scale.”<sup>6</sup> According to Veblen, the

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<sup>4</sup> Matthias Varul, “After Heroism: Religion Verses Consumerism,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 19, no. 2 (2008): 242.

<sup>5</sup> Veblen, *Theory of the Leisure Class*, 71.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

highest social class determines the goods and services that demarcate status to the other groups.

While status and association still influence people's patterns of consumption, Veblen's theory of consumption functions differently today. Individuals continue to consume in order to demonstrate their social status, because "wealthier people tend to consume more."<sup>7</sup> This is one reason the world's growing middle class practices particular consumption patterns. They want to live like the global consumer class. Besides emulating the elites, there is another motive the middle and upper classes have for consuming. It is to show their individualism. Unlike the poor who are barely able to survive, these richer classes have the financial ability to use their conspicuous consumption as an expression of self-creativity and personal identity.

Daniel Miller's anthropological work supports this distinction. Interviewing the residents of a South London street, Miller offers multiple accounts of individuals who "express themselves through their possessions, and what [their possessions] tell us about their lives."<sup>8</sup> Many of his participants admitted that their experiences of consumption were assertions of who they are, where they have been, and how they want others to know them.

Like Miller, Colin Campbell believes that self-identification is at the core of today's consumerism. For Campbell, a person's propensity to imagine what life *could* be is linked to identity consumerism. This is related to what he dubs "daydreaming." This differs from fantasy in that daydreaming "concerns events and scenarios that might

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Brower and Warren Leon, "US Consumption and the Environment," in *Consumption, Population, and Sustainability*, ed. Audrey Chapman, Rodney Petersen, and Barbara Smith-Moran (Washington, DC: Island Press, 2000), 98.

<sup>8</sup> Miller, *The Comfort of Things*, 1.

actually occur at some point in the future.”<sup>9</sup> The imaginative situation offers pleasure by creating a vision of an individual’s potential possibilities. People can picture a completely different life and make consumptive choices that actualizing their conceptualized selves. In this way, consumerism provides “the central focus of the efforts of individuals to create and maintain their personal identities.”<sup>10</sup> It offers people an opportunity to pursue the life they have dreamed of, while simultaneously signaling their chosen identity.

### Consumerism and Liberty

Others have noted that in addition to consumption functioning as an expression of personal identity, it also has the capacity to provide individuals a form of freedom. Within consumerism, it matters not only what people consume, but also that people consume. Since consumption is the goal, non-essential wares enter the market to perpetuate opportunities for shopping excursions. This growing abundance of available goods necessitates choice. Consumerism does not require that shoppers buy a specific type of good; rather, the multitude of options requires that individuals decide what products they want. Advertisements and social pressures employ various psychological and emotional means to entice people to buy particular items, yet the consumer’s choice is still an exercise of individual freedom.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Colin Campbell, “Consuming Goods and the Good of Consuming,” in Glickman, *Consumer Society in American History*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

<sup>11</sup> It is important to distinguish between mentally competent adults as opposed to children since “research has shown that young children—younger than 8 years—are cognitively and psychologically defenseless against advertising.” American Academy of Pediatrics, “Children, Adolescents, and Advertising,” *Pediatrics* 118, no. 6 (2006): 2563, <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/118/6/2563.full.pdf+html> (accessed July 5, 2013).

Chapter one touched on this notion of consumers' liberty in the section on the economic sphere. Adam Smith posited that people's abilities to work and consume as they choose has a direct relationship to personal and national prosperity. This led him to advocate for open consumer markets in which individuals' demands—not governments' intervention—influence the price and availability of products. Such an economic system allows people to express "a certain propensity in human nature...to truck, barter, and exchange one thing for another."<sup>12</sup> Humanity engages in these activities based on self-interest, and it is this self-interest that is an expression of an individual's natural liberty.

Milton Friedman has championed Smith's idea that a free market economy promotes personal liberty. When there are more goods available to purchase, individuals have greater opportunities to express themselves. This view drives his efforts to maximize people's economic liberty. For Friedman, "[the market] is, in political terms, a system of proportional representation. Each man can vote, as it were, for the color of tie he wants and get it; he does not have to see what color the majority wants and then, if he is in the minority, submit."<sup>13</sup> In the most liberal economy, every choice a consumer makes would demonstrate her freedom and recognize "one of the strongest and most creative forces known to man—the attempt by millions of individuals to promote their own interests, to live their lives by their own values."<sup>14</sup>

This individual ability to buy based upon personal criteria and preferences is one of the conditions intrinsic to consumerism. Manufacturers succeed or fail based on their

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<sup>12</sup> Smith, *Wealth of the Nations*, 6.

<sup>13</sup> Milton Friedman, *Capitalism and Freedom: Fortieth Anniversary* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 15.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 200.

ability to meet the perceived needs and wants of consumers. This is true in all financial systems where consumption plays a foundational role in the economy: semi- and non-essential goods remain at the discretion of the buyer.

Russia offers an example of a nation that demonstrates its prerogative through consumption. During the early 1990s, Russia suffered from a lack of affordable meat. US President George W. Bush used this opportunity to export the United States' unwanted dark-meat chicken to Russia, giving American farmers an opportunity to sell in a previously closed market. Though the US helped Russia escape food shortages by filling their shops with an abundance of cheap chicken thighs, Russians have avoided "Bush legs" as much as possible since their food crisis has abated.<sup>15</sup> US chickens are still available; however, "Russian shoppers complain about their water content and, after a campaign in the Russian press, about hormones and antibiotics."<sup>16</sup> While America insists that scientific research supports the safety of its chemically cleaned poultry, Russia's chief sanitary officer reframes the issue in terms of liberty. Consumerism provides Russians the freedom and power to choose: "We pay the money, so we set the conditions for what kind of meat we want and what kind we don't."<sup>17</sup>

In the United States, the same question surrounding the genuine scale of freedom of choice finds relevance in the organic food industry. During the 1960s, local vendors

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<sup>15</sup> While many articles note Russians affectionately named the imported poultry "Bush legs" in gratitude for the US President's assistance, by the mid 1990s many used the term derisively and intentionally bought similarly priced, but smaller non-US chickens to demonstrate their objection to America's coercive importation policies.

<sup>16</sup> Will Englund, "In Poultry War, Russia Has a Leg Up on US," *Washington Post*, October 31, 2010, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/10/31/AR2010103104542.html> (accessed July 5, 2013).

<sup>17</sup> Michael Schwartz, "Russia Seeks to Cleanse Its Palate of US Chicken," *New York Times*, January 19, 2010, [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/20/world/europe/20russia.html?\\_r=1](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/20/world/europe/20russia.html?_r=1) (accessed July 5, 2013).

began advertising non-chemically treated, all-natural produce and meat at roadside stands and small farms. What started as a food trend confined to localized growing regions is now available in chain grocery stores across the country. Since 2000, organic food sales have consistently improved until they accounted for four percent of total food sales in 2010.<sup>18</sup> With such a robust market, it is not surprising that there is conflict between smaller, traditional organic farms and new-to-the-trend agro-businesses, and the controversy revolves around the liberty of the consumer.

According to Mikael Klintman, the debate centers on which foods should and should not receive the organic stamp. Traditional organic farmers argue that the organic label offers a judicious description, assuring consumers of a product's benign and natural effects on human and planetary health. For this group, the term *organic* describes both the processes in which food is grown and the potential benefits of avoiding chemically treated foods that may pose dangers. However, the United States' Department of Agriculture (USDA), the major food corporations, and the genetically modified (GM) food industry all oppose this definition, arguing that only the process—and not the perceived safety or nutritional value—is relevant. Governing agencies have sided with the USDA and its allies to apply the name “organic” only to the process and not to extraneous conditions. They have developed

a very clear *yes, unless* position as regards the safety of GM, radiation and in some cases the use of human biosolids. The *yes, unless* positions means, in this case, that unless a process has been proven dangerous to human health—through “sufficient” scientific evidence—a restriction of the use

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<sup>18</sup> Organic Trade Association, “2011 Organic Industry Survey,” Table 1, <http://www.ota.com/pics/documents/2011OrganicIndustrySurvey.pdf> (accessed July 5, 2013).

of the organic label would be highly misleading and should thus be avoided.<sup>19</sup>

In order to avoid confirming the assumption that organic implies “healthier,” this allows genetically modified foods and other non-natural processes to qualify for the organic label.

Believing that consumers would disagree with such a broad definition of “organic,” traditional organic farmers have reframed their argument into a consumer rights campaign. As Mikael Klintman observes, they changed “the originally modest intrinsic-value framing of organic food labeling as a ‘marketing standard’ (i.e. the free-market rhetoric) created by the USDA...into a stronger, political rhetoric of consumer empowerment, consumer democracy and even the right to ‘free speech’ of organic producers to consumers.”<sup>20</sup> As in Russia, the issue of food safety shifts to the issue of personal liberty of consumptive choice.

Organic food labeling is only one example of how consumer freedom of choice has changed the food industry. Another example of this was the 1985 public outcry against Coca-Cola’s “New Coke,” in which the company not only brought back “Classic Coke,” but also completely eliminated its redesigned formula. More serious instances have included boycotts against brands like Nike and Victoria’s Secret for using sweatshop labor. These companies were influenced by consumer pressure and changed how they treated their workers. Recently, Apple has faced threats of boycott for dealing with Chinese suppliers who maintain harsh and unsafe working conditions. Facing an

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<sup>19</sup> Mikael Klintman, “Ambiguous Framings of Political Consumerism,” *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 30, no. 5 (2006): 433.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 435.

unfavorable public relations scenario, Apple has demanded that its affiliates change their practices while the company continues to review its consumers' concerns.<sup>21</sup>

### Consumerism and Moral Beliefs

Combining the potential liberty of consumerism with the personal identity it permits allows individuals to use their consumptive practices as an assertion of their moral viewpoints. Purchased goods have a purpose beyond their functionality: a customer seeks out and buys from companies and brands that agree and support her or his ethical beliefs. As with organic foods, some people intentionally shop for products according to the specific processes through which an item enters the market. Cost and aesthetic appeal can become less important than how the product conforms to an individual's ethical beliefs. Because the ethic of consumerism is self-defined happiness through consuming, there can be great variety here. Nevertheless, promoting social change through "conviction consumerism" is a form of intentional activism which is a behavior indicative of personhood. The phrases conviction consumerism and conviction consumption describe those acts of buying that individuals engage in for the specific purpose of demonstrating their personal beliefs and values; consumers intentionally buy particular products or brands that align with their convictions.

The degree to which consumers around the world participate in ethical purchasing varies, but the trend is growing.<sup>22</sup> While North American and European Union consumers have continually increased their participation in conviction consumption, they lag behind

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<sup>21</sup> Poornima Gupta and Edwin Chan, "Apple, Foxconn Set New Standard for Chinese Workers," *Reuters*, March 30, 2012, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/03/30/us-apple-foxconn-idUSBRE82S19720120330> (accessed July 6, 2013).

<sup>22</sup> Edelman, *Executive Summary: 2012*, Goodpurpose Study (April 2012), 3, <http://www.scribd.com/doc/90411623/Executive-Summary-2012-Edelman-goodpurpose%C2%AE-Study> (accessed July 6, 2013).



Rapid Growth Economy (RGE) countries like China, India, and Brazil. Sixty percent of those polled in RGE nations agree that they are “likely to pay a premium for a company’s products/services if the company supports a good cause.” This compares with thirty-two percent of their Western counterparts.<sup>23</sup> This confirms Lars Gulbrandsen’s research that relies on several studies that “indicate that consumers [in Canada, Great Britain, and Norway] are seldom willing to pay more than a few per cent premium for verified environmentally friendly seafood and forest products even in environmentally concerned markets.”<sup>24</sup> Gross National Product (GNP) figures from these countries would suggest that the numbers should be reversed—the greater the GNP of a nation, the more its citizens can afford to spend on conviction consumption. However, the data suggests otherwise.

If wealth is not the issue, then there must be another reason more affluent consumers do not engage in conviction consumerism. A study from Finland concludes that “the most important obstacles to increasing ethical consumption are the difficulty of finding information about ethical products, the lack of any guarantee, the lack of ethical product alternatives, and too few retail outlets selling ethical products.”<sup>25</sup> This finding suggests that conviction consumerism will remain low in the West as long as obstacles like these remain unaddressed for the consumer.

More and more vendors are, in fact, addressing these concerns. This is leading to a growing range of consumable goods offered for conviction consumerism. Familiar

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 5, figure 6.

<sup>24</sup> Gulbrandsen, “Markets for Eco-labeling,” 479.

<sup>25</sup> Outi Uusitalo and Reetta Oksanen, “Ethical Consumerism,” *International Journal of Consumer Studies* 28, no. 3 (2004): 218.

companies like American Apparel and Chipotle carefully and publicly document the locations and farms from which they receive the supplies that go into their products. Clothes are dyed and sewn in-house and animals are “naturally raised.” Ecologically sustainable energy sources like solar- and wind-power are also used. Smaller firms and businesses identify themselves as fair trade retailers—that is, businesses that help “buyers and producers engage in ethical trade relationships that allow both parties to celebrate their human dignity.”<sup>26</sup> A principal component of fair-trade consumption is that buyers and sellers participate in what they see as socially responsible practices.

Regardless of whether the purposeful purchasing occurs through a chain store like Ten Thousand Villages or with small-scale businesses, fair-trade products fall into two categories: certifiabiles and partnerships. The first approach uses third-party monitors who place a seal or a stamp upon products that meet particular production and administrative standards.<sup>27</sup> This assures customers who want to buy coffee, tea, chocolate, cotton, jewelry, and other commodities that the certified goods adhere to specific guidelines that conform to their ethical convictions. Observable documentation such as certification stickers has a second effect; the mark visibly distinguishes between two otherwise similar products and alerts people to the fair-trade option.

Another method is trade partnerships. This relies less on an intermediary and more on a relationship developed directly between the seller and the maker. This knowledge helps assure buyers that a product meets their personal ethical standards. Recently, partnerships have begun to join accreditation membership groups to add to

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<sup>26</sup> Fair Earth, “What Does ‘Fair Trade’ Mean?” <http://www.ourfairearth.com/about.php>, (accessed July 6, 2013).

<sup>27</sup> Margaret Levi and April Linton, “Fair Trade: A Cup at a Time?” *Politics & Society* 31, no. 3 (2003): 416, <http://pas.sagepub.com/content/31/3/407> (July 6, 2013).

their credibility, but this is secondary to the relationship between the merchant and the producer. This rapport is the most significant authentication of a product.

Throughout the world, people use consumerism to elucidate their convictions and bring about a society more in line with their values. Again, the moral principles individuals associate with the fair trade or organic goods they buy do not derive from consumerism. People who buy according to their values may simply be engaging in ethical consumption, but this differs from conviction consumerism. Conviction consumerism begins with the ethic of consumerism: self-defined happiness through consuming. It is conviction consumerism when people seek happiness through their consumptive practices in order to achieve some economic, social, or religious end. In this way, conviction consumerism fosters personhood because it allows people to express their moral beliefs.

### Consumerism and Incidental Benevolence

While buying according to convictions is one way of framing personhood within consumerism, another method is *incidental benevolence*. Incidental benevolence describes those acts of buying that individuals engage in that promote corporate philanthropy without any willful intent on the part of the buyer; consumers purchase particular products or brands inattentive to any support their shopping generates. In this approach, individuals exercise their will by partnering with a business after making a purchase. The key difference between this and conviction consumption is intention. The consumer wants a particular type of item and the manufacturer happens to support a cause about which the buyer may have only extraneous concerns at the moment of purchase. Knowledge of a company's generous or laudable behavior may influence

individuals to buy that brand over another, but the cause is secondary to the product. A corporation's activism may also prevent a customer from choosing its brand, but this is rare in incidental benevolence because the product, not the cause, motivates the purchase.

The degree of collaborative involvement required by buyers varies by company. Sometimes, a consumer only needs to purchase a specific product model of the same brand. This item is almost identical to all the others, but the manufacturer donates to the receiving organization according to the sales of only that very particular model. At other times, shoppers must demonstrate their willingness to support the cause by not only buying a good, but also remitting some part of the product's packaging back to the company. This includes such practices as collecting and mailing in labels or entering website codes found on specially marked boxes. In both instances, manufactures and consumers work together to "do good" through acts of consumption, but this is incidental to the product itself. Examples of these types of benevolence abound, and they raise millions of dollars for not-for-profit foundations.

(Product) RED—often referred to as (RED)—is the most noted and comprehensive licensing agreement between companies and a third-party charitable enterprise. This agreement allows customers to buy name-brand goods, knowing that a portion of the profits will support a worthy cause. Companies do this by manufacturing (RED) versions of the same product line—usually in the color red to distinguish it from its non-charitable counterparts—and donate a percentage of the profits from those sales to supplement HIV/AIDS grants. Consumers become aware of the meaning of (RED) products because celebrities serve as representatives who raise public attention to the existence and benefit of purchasing these specific products. Individuals buy the various

(RED) items offered and thereby communicate to “the manufacturers of the (RED) products [to] send a contribution directly to the Global Fund.”<sup>28</sup> The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria uses one hundred percent of the money it receives from (Product) RED to fund “antiretroviral therapy for HIV positive individuals, support HIV prevention, feed and educate children orphaned by AIDS and provide the low-cost treatments needed to reduce the risk of transmission of HIV from mother-to-child.”<sup>29</sup>

Nearly twenty businesses participate in (RED) products, including brands like Coca-Cola, NIKE, American Express (UK), and Hallmark, and they donate generously to Global Fund. From 2008 to 2012, Starbucks has implemented a variety of ways to allow customers to partner with them in support of (Product) RED and Global Fund. Gift card purchases, CDs, to-go cups, and even the simple act of buying coffee helped Starbucks contribute an estimated \$10 million during those five years.<sup>30</sup> Apple also sells (RED) products and has been “(RED)’s largest contributor to the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria—giving tens of millions of dollars that have transformed the lives of more than two million Africans.”<sup>31</sup> To date, this economic initiative has

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<sup>28</sup> The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria, “How (RED) Works,” <http://theglobalfund.org/en/donors/private/red/> (accessed July 6, 2013).

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., “Press Kit: (RED) Factsheet,” 1, [http://www.joinred.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/pdf/\(RED\)%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf](http://www.joinred.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/pdf/(RED)%20Fact%20Sheet.pdf) (accessed July 6, 2013).

<sup>30</sup> Rory Wehrle, “Starbucks Quietly Ends Its Product Red Card Contributions,” *Shop With Meaning*, March 4, 2012, <http://shopwithmeaning.org/2012/03/starbucks-quietly-ends-its-product-red-card-contributions/> (accessed July 6, 2013).

<sup>31</sup> Bono, “Bono Praises Steve Jobs as Generous and ‘Poetic’,” Opinion Pages, *New York Times*, September 1, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/02/opinion/bono-praises-steve-jobs-as-generous-and-poetic.html> (accessed July 6, 2013).

generated more than \$195 million to help fourteen million people.<sup>32</sup> Licensed (RED)

companies encourage individuals to buy the red version of a product—one the customer was already planning on buying—in order to assist the business in donating a portion of the proceeds to a socially commendable cause.

The alternative method of incidental benevolence requires shoppers to do more than simply choose to buy an incidentally beneficent product; they must follow through after the purchase by devoting a negligible amount of time and effort to signal consumer approval of the businesses' support of certain organizations. This approach is prominent in the food industry where causes range from cancer research to school fundraising.

Yoplait yogurt encourages people to send in their foil lids to support breast cancer research and awareness. Their website states that “since 1997, Yoplait has donated more than \$34 million to the cause through the *Save Lids to Save Lives* program, Race for the Cure and other initiatives.”<sup>33</sup> Similarly, General Mills promotes Box Tops for Education (BTFE) on its products, which donates ten cents for every token turned in to the school's BTFE coordinator. In 2011, this process earned over 80,000 schools more than \$74 million, and since its inception in 1996 it has generated over \$475 million.<sup>34</sup>

Individuals who purchase from companies that support benevolent foundations advantage all three groups. The partnership between businesses and non-profits helps raise awareness of the charitable organization to a much broader audience than it would

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<sup>32</sup> The Global Fund, “(RED): Impact,” Donors, <http://theglobalfund.org/en/donors/private/red/> (accessed July 6, 2013).

<sup>33</sup> Yoplait, “Save Lids to Save Lives,” Yoplait Doing Good, <http://www.yoplait.com/yoplait-in-action/save-lids-to-save-lives> (accessed July 6, 2013).

<sup>34</sup> Box Tops for Education, “Box Tops Makes an Amazing Difference in Schools!” MPEG, <http://www.boxtops4education.com/Sweepstakes.aspx/Year-End-Video-Sweepstakes/395> (accessed September 5, 2012; site now discontinued).

otherwise reach, not only garnering more attention, but also potentially increasing the number of individual donors aiding its efforts. The collaboration serves the interest of corporations as consumers associate a company's name with being socially conscious and philanthropic, and select its products as expressions of their own benevolence. Finally, the buyer benefits in the arrangement. Consumers who may not otherwise be able to financially support an organization can assist it in raising funds. They can eat Campbell's soup for sustenance and return the label to a school, thereby helping the school collect money from Campbell's. Consumers can also create the potential to enhance their status by buying a recognizable incidentally benevolent product. It serves as a testimony of its owner's association and advocacy with the altruistic cause. The purchase also continues to aid the non-profit organization and the corporation. It serves as a visible reminder to others of the union between the product's manufacturer and the beneficent cause, as well as generating money for both. These three separate entities—consumers, manufacturers, and non-profit groups—form a propitious alliance by way of consumerism.

As with conviction consumerism, incidental benevolence does not necessitate the practice of consumerism. Rather, people use the act of consuming to tell others who they are through how and what they consume: consumerism gives them identity. Some individuals seek social and ecological justice through their conviction consumption, while others willingly support causes through incidental benevolence. The act of consuming offers its adherents opportunities to promote the well-being of neighbors, society, and the world at large. By being a consumer, individuals illustrate and develop their personhood.

## Consumerism and the Environment

Consumerism not only affirms key traits of personhood and a sense of identity and affiliation, but it also expresses how people think about the environment. What is the purpose of the planet? What is humanity's relationship and responsibility toward it? The answers to these questions contribute to a more robust understanding of the ethic of consumption. A lifestyle conforming to the ethic of consumerism (personal happiness through consuming) permits and encourages ecological damage. This includes climate change, a shrinking ozone layer, and habitat destruction. Research has consistently shown that Western-style consumption affects the earth and its diverse ecosystems and species.<sup>35</sup> The following section examines two ways human consumption patterns directly contribute to environmental degradation: resource depletion and pollution.

### Resource Depletion

Since the twentieth century, there has been a notable shift in the number of consumers and their ability to consume. The world's population has quadrupled since 1900, and it continues to rise. In addition to an increased number of people, industrial/technological advances have permitted the production of more and more goods for consumption.<sup>36</sup> Finally, globalization has increased personal wealth, which allows more people to buy the many products being made. The combination of these three factors has changed the impact humanity's consumption has on the planet, particularly for the rich.

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<sup>35</sup> Controversy surrounds the degree of culpability humanity has on issues of climate change and species extinction; however, many would agree that continuous consumption exacerbates these situations.

<sup>36</sup> Barry Commoner, *The Closing Circle: Nature, Man, and Technology* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1971) and Lester Brown, *Plan B 4.0: Mobilizing to Save Civilization* (NY: Norton, 2009) address this issue.



The wealthiest nations consume nearly eighty-five percent of the planet's resources.<sup>37</sup> Overwhelming evidence indicates that the earth cannot sustain this usage rate of non-renewable materials, especially if undeveloped nations strive to meet this level of consumption. Seven billion people cannot consume at a level similar to the United States: "indeed, if everyone lived like Americans, Earth could sustain only 1.4 billion people."<sup>38</sup> As projections predict over nine billion people on the planet by 2050, ideas of resource consumption become even more disconcerting. Since France, Germany, Japan, the United Kingdom, and the United States—ten percent of the world's population—already use fifty percent of several industrial raw materials, there are simply not enough resources.<sup>39</sup>

Within the United States, oil is the resource that receives the most attention. As the leading consumer of the world's oil, the US identifies access to oil as a matter of national interest and security. The significance of this commodity explains why "Defense Secretary Leon E. Panetta said any move [by Iran] to block the Strait of Hormuz, through which about a third of the world's sea-borne traded oil passes, would be seen as a 'red line,' requiring a response."<sup>40</sup> Yet the finiteness of oil is certain. The twenty largest and most accessible oil fields have been producing for over thirty years, and some geologists

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<sup>37</sup> Durning, *How Much Is Enough?*, 50-51.

<sup>38</sup> Assadourian, "Rise and Fall of Consumer Cultures," in Starke and Mastny, *2010 State of the World*, 6.

<sup>39</sup> Elaine Baker and others, "Waste from Consumption and Production—Our Increasing Appetite for Natural Resources," in *Vital Waste Graphics*, UNEP/GRID-Arendal (2004), 14-15, [http://www.grida.no/graphicslib/detail/consumption-of-selected-industrial-raw-materials-compared-to-global-population\\_bf26](http://www.grida.no/graphicslib/detail/consumption-of-selected-industrial-raw-materials-compared-to-global-population_bf26). (accessed July 6, 2013).

<sup>40</sup> "Iran Steps Back from Warning on U.S. Ships," *New York Times*, January 21, 2012, <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/22/world/asia/iran-says-us-warships-in-gulf-are-nothing-new.html> (accessed July 6, 2013).

suggest these reservoirs have already reached their peak.<sup>41</sup> Lester Brown finds that “since 1981, oil extraction has exceeded new discoveries by an ever-widening margin.”<sup>42</sup> With a decline in the availability of cheap and readily obtainable oil, companies are exploring more expensive and higher-risk sources like tar sands, shale, and deep-water drilling to satisfy the oil demands of both America and a growing global population.

Even if cost and safety do not make these methods prohibitive, many suspect the planet lacks the quantity of oil necessary for other countries to achieve America’s consumption levels. According to the US Department of Energy, all oil producing nations yielded a combined estimated total of 83.8 million barrels of refined petroleum products a day in 2010.<sup>43</sup> Refined petroleum products include motor gasoline, jet fuel, kerosene, fuel oil, and similar products. That same year, the 308.7 million people living in the United States consumed approximately 19.2 million barrels of refined petroleum products a day.<sup>44</sup> While production has increased slightly and US consumption has decreased somewhat, assuming China’s 1.3 billion people were able to consume at a magnitude similar to the US in 2010, China alone would use roughly 80.6 million barrels a day—ninety-six percent of the world’s refined petroleum products. If this calculation expands beyond China to include the 1.2 billion people of India, refined petroleum production would need to increase by 70.7 million barrels a day to meet the demand for just these

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<sup>41</sup> Brown, *Plan B 4.0*, 72.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>43</sup> US Department of Energy, “International Energy Statistics Petroleum Production: Refined Petroleum Products,” <http://www.eia.gov/cfapps/ipdbproject/iedindex3.cfm?tid=5&pid=54&aid=1&cid=regions&syid=2008&eyid=2012&unit=TBDP> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> US Department of Energy, “International Energy Statistics Petroleum Consumption: Total Petroleum Consumption,” <http://www.eia.gov/cfapps/ipdbproject/IEDIndex3.cfm?tid=5&pid=5&aid=2> (accessed July 7, 2013).

two countries.<sup>45</sup> Even if oil production grows to 154 million barrels a day, this only allows thirty-six percent of the world's population to consume at the US rate.<sup>46</sup> In order to meet the demands of all seven billion people on the planet consuming like America, oil extraction would need to quadruple.<sup>47</sup>

While American leaders see oil as the key natural resource vital for maintaining a consumer society, many countries recognize the availability of clean water as paramount to their flourishing. A growing scarcity of clean, fresh water eliminates consumerism's ability to produce *ad infinitum*. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) finds that "sixty-three percent of the population in Brazil, Russia, India and China together are living under medium to severe water stress; this share will increase to eighty percent by 2030 unless new measures to better manage water resources are introduced."<sup>48</sup> The OECD estimates that over a third of the world's population lives in severe water-stressed areas and that number will near the four billion mark by 2030.<sup>49</sup> The problem is that the perpetual production necessary to meet the needs of a continually

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<sup>45</sup> The numbers concerning population and refined petroleum consumption are estimates based on simplistic ratio formulas that assume there are roughly 4.2 Chinese for every American and 3.85 Indians for every American. Multiplying these numbers by the US daily barrel of oil usage equals the sums given.

<sup>46</sup> The 'thirty-six percent' statistic derives from adding the populations of China and India and dividing by 7 billion people, roughly the world population in 2011.

<sup>47</sup> I am emphasizing the limitedness of oil because this is fundamental to humanity's ability to consume it. From a consumeristic perspective, cost and resource availability are key issues over many other concerns. While there are other perspectives that would emphasize different concerns (i.e., the ecological disaster caused by the carbon emissions from such oil usage), my focus is on this aspect of consumption.

<sup>48</sup> OECD, *OECD Environmental Outlook to 2030* (OECD Publishing, 2008), 7, <http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/29/33/40200582.pdf> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

consuming world requires high volumes of water usage. This has led to the over-pumping of aquifers for urban, agricultural, and industrial needs.<sup>50</sup>

In the United States, industry's need for large quantities of water raises little attention, perhaps because the country's supply seems limitless. However, the amount of water used by manufacturing is vast. According to the United States Geological Survey's (USGS) most current data from 2005, industry ranks as the fourth largest consumer of freshwater. While it only accounts for eight percent of the country's total freshwater withdrawals, this is misleading. The USGS does not include the totality of industry's water usage; specifically, the amount of water "used in the thermoelectric-power industry to cool electricity-generating equipment."<sup>51</sup> This is water indirectly consumed by US industries that provides the electricity necessary to run their businesses. This is a critical omission. Power companies alone constitute forty-one percent of all freshwater utilization, more than three times the public's usage,<sup>52</sup> and the industrial sector consumes twenty-six percent of the nation's electrical power.<sup>53</sup> When this data is added to water usage figures, industry withdraws a much larger percentage of water than the USGS's survey enumerates.

Relevant too is the quantity of water employed in irrigation, the second largest use category after thermoelectric power. According to USGS, irrigation "used about thirty-

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<sup>50</sup> Brown, *Plan B 4.0*, 41-42. Although Brown does not directly address industry's usage of water resources in his chapter focusing on water, he alludes to it within the context of cities' needs.

<sup>51</sup> US Geological Survey, "Total Water Use, by Category of Use, 2005," <http://ga.water.usgs.gov/edu/wateruse-total.html> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> US Department of Energy, "Electricity Consumption Totaled Nearly 3,856 Billion Kilowatthours (kWh) in 2011," Energy Explained: Secondary Sources, [http://www.eia.gov/energyexplained/index.cfm?page=electricity\\_use](http://www.eia.gov/energyexplained/index.cfm?page=electricity_use) (accessed July 7, 2013).

seven percent of all fresh surface water, but ignoring thermoelectric-power withdrawals, irrigation accounted for about sixty-two percent of the Nation's surface water withdrawals."<sup>54</sup> Farmers in every state irrigate their crops; however, some parts of the country receive more precipitation due to their natural climates. When water-intensive crops like rice and wheat are grown in areas that receive minimal rainfall, the plants require even more supplemental water resources. This is the situation occurring in California, a state that receives only twenty-two inches of rain annually, yet consumes the greatest volume of non-thermoelectric-used water. California uses five and a half times more surface freshwater for irrigation than its public supply consumption.

The disparity between water for irrigation and for public consumption is even greater in Idaho, a state whose yearly rainfall totals nineteen inches. As the eighth driest state in the Union, Idaho uses 525 gallons of water for irrigation for every one gallon consumed in its public supply.<sup>55</sup> Although the state has fewer people and therefore requires less water for its public supply, Idaho grows water-thirsty crops like barley, wheat, and corn despite having little annual precipitation. Idaho utilizes more water for irrigating its land than the combined public supply usages of California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan, America's eight most populated States.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> US Geological Survey, "Total Water Use, 2005."

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., "Estimated Use of Water in the United States in 2000," Water Use in the United States, Table 3, 2000, <http://pubs.usgs.gov/circ/2004/circ1268/htdocs/table03.html> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>56</sup> Paul Mackun and Steven Wilson, "Population Distribution and Change: 2000 to 2010," *2010 Census Briefs* (Washington, DC, March 2011), Table 1, <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2010/briefs/c2010br-01.pdf> (accessed July 7, 2013).

Even with access to more fresh water than most people in the world, US citizens must concern themselves with how much of this natural resource is used to produce the goods that sustain consumer society. For states adjoining large bodies of water such as the Great Lakes, concern over water consumption/conservation may seem unnecessary. However, four of those lakes (Erie, Superior, Huron, and Michigan) have consistently remained between a quarter to a half meter below their average water levels during the 2000 to 2010 period.<sup>57</sup> While fluctuating water depths are normal, the lakes' trend of below-average levels should inspire reflection on their usage in order to avoid water mismanagement situations similar to those now occurring in the Western United States and Kazakhstan. Both the Colorado River and the Aral Sea offer examples of the limitedness of once-seemingly endless supplies of water.

The Colorado River is a controlled sequence of reservoirs flowing through the Mojave, Sonoran, and Great Basin deserts, providing water and electricity for several arid Western States. Behind its artificial barriers, the Colorado River pools into man-made lakes that create the presumption of an abundance of available water. This has encouraged individuals and industries to locate there, increasing the number of people relying on the river's store. However, the growth of the region over the past several decades and its multi-year drought have taxed the Colorado and its reservoirs, causing the water levels of its two major lakes to drop dramatically.

It took nineteen years to fill Lake Mead to a level of 24 million acre feet in 1998, and between then and 2007, the lake's level had decreased by fifty-four percent, leaving only 11.5 million acre feet of water behind the Hoover Dam.... It took seventeen years to fill Lake Powell to its full

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<sup>57</sup> Great Lakes Environmental Research Laboratory, "Great Lakes Water Level Dashboard: 2000 – 2012," <http://www.glerl.noaa.gov/data/now/wlevels/dbd/> (accessed July 7, 2013).

capacity of 27 million acre feet, and in just six years, between 1999 and 2005, the level of the lake had been reduced by sixty percent.<sup>58</sup>

With the Southwest receiving more precipitation the past several years, both lakes are slowly refilling. However, the last time Lake Mead was at its 2010 average water elevation level—including the period of last decade’s drought—was in 1937 while it was still filling.<sup>59</sup> Lake Powell has fared slightly better. Its elevation has continually improved with renewed rainfall, but Lake Powell has not reached the lows of its 2011 average water elevation since 1973, except for two years in the 1990s.<sup>60</sup> This issue has become so great that the US Secretary of the Interior created interim guidelines for the operation of Lakes Mead and Powell in 2007 because “tensions among the Basin States brought the basin closer to multi-state and inter-basin litigation than perhaps any time since the adoption of the [Colorado River] Compact.”<sup>61</sup>

Perhaps the most disconcerting example of depleting the planet’s water supply in order to produce more consumable goods involves the former Soviet Union. In the 1960s, the Soviets diverted the Aral Sea’s two main tributaries in order to irrigate cotton and rice crops. Although the project was an agricultural success, its water volume has “decreased by seventy-five percent, the equivalent of draining Lakes Erie and Ontario, and its

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<sup>58</sup> Massachusetts Institute of Technology. “Colorado River Water Issues,” Mission 2012: Clean Water, <http://web.mit.edu/12.000/www/m2012/finalwebsite/problem/coloradoriver.shtml#overdraw> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>59</sup> US Bureau of Reclamation, “Lake Mead: Averages by Year,” Water Databases: Lake Mead, <http://lakemead.water-data.com/index2.php> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>60</sup> US Bureau of Reclamation, “Lake Powell: Averages by Year,” Water Databases: Lake Powell, <http://lakepowell.water-data.com/index2.php> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>61</sup> US Department of the Interior, *Record of Decision: Colorado River Interim Guidelines* (Washington, DC, November 2007), 11. <http://water.nv.gov/hearings/past/dry/browseable/exhibits%5CSNWA%5CRebuttals%5CVolume%202/392.pdf> (accessed July 7, 2013).

surface area by fifty percent.”<sup>62</sup> Formerly the fourth largest body of freshwater in the world, the Aral Sea is now two separate lakes divided by an ever-growing desert. To save the northern section of the Aral, Kazakhstan built a dam to refill a small portion of this previous reservoir. However, the Uzbekistan government continues to use the Aral’s southern tributary for cotton irrigation, further drying up the land and forcing those living there to adjust to more extreme temperatures during the summer and winter months, as well as deal with increasing health complications caused by dust storms.<sup>63</sup> The Sea’s former harbor cities no longer prosper from the local fishing industry. Instead, canneries preserve fish brought in by trains from the Pacific Ocean and the towns serve eco-tourists who come to gaze upon deserted ship hulls rusting in sand miles from the nearest body of water.<sup>64</sup>

### Pollution

The ethic of consumerism not only allows resource depletion but also lacks the substance to constrain pollution. Individuals dismiss the planetary effects of continuous consumption in favor of its economic and sociological benefits. While conviction consumption and conviction consumerism can mitigate ecological degradation, practicing these is a personal choice based on beliefs and values attained elsewhere. People can choose to buy goods based on their convictions, but nothing within the ethic of consumerism demands this action of them. This distinction is important; it explains how

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<sup>62</sup> Visearth, “The Aral Sea” University California, San Diego, [http://visearth.ucsd.edu/VisE\\_Int/aralsea/index.html](http://visearth.ucsd.edu/VisE_Int/aralsea/index.html) (accessed September 5, 2012; site now discontinued).

<sup>63</sup> Pat Walters, “Aral Sea Recovery?” *National Geographic: Daily News*, April 2, 2010, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2010/04/100402-aral-sea-story/> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>64</sup> Al Gore, *Earth in the Balance* (New York: Plume, 1993), 19-20.



people who accept consumerism can ignore the harmful environmental consequences endemic to its practice.

The pollution that results from living a life of consumerism negatively impacts the entire planet in various ways. Communities suffer from smog and other air pollutants when planners design cities that promote individualized travel. Corporations show little concern for planetary wellbeing when they intentionally relocate to countries that have weak environmental laws and regulations to produce their products. Non-human species are endangered as ranchers transform forest habitats into grazing ranges in order to supply a growing demand for beef. Such activities provide consumable goods by which people can seek their happiness, but they also result in multiple earth-polluting conditions like “toxic and radioactive wastes, atmospheric contamination, acid rain, deterioration of the ozone layer, poisoning of the land, water and air.”<sup>65</sup>

The ethic of consumerism presumes that people are continually buying in their pursuit of happiness. This never-ending purchasing of goods results in gaining more possessions, which fills up the finite spaces in which people live. As George Carlin quips, “that's all your house is: a place to keep your stuff. If you didn't have so much stuff, you wouldn't need a house. You could just walk around all the time.”<sup>66</sup> Once individuals run out of room for their personal belongings, they do not stop accumulating; instead, they solve their space issues by throwing out items in order to recover room for more. Yet, when individuals set out their garbage for its weekly collection, few imagine the total quantity of trash being discarded.

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<sup>65</sup> Leonardo Boff, “Social Ecology: Poverty and Misery,” in *Ecotheology: Voices from South and North*, ed. David G. Hallman (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1994), 237.

<sup>66</sup> George Carlin, “A Place for My Stuff,” *A Place for My Stuff* (Atlantic Records), 2001.

Many items that people throw out are goods intentionally created to follow a cycle of “discard and replace.” This is the process of buying a new version of the same item with the purpose of disposing the outdated design. Two everyday items that succumb to this pattern are clothing and paper. Fashion-conscious people purge their wardrobes of those pieces that are no longer in style to make room for the latest trends. Others do so because they no longer fit into their old attire. In both cases, the majority of this unwanted apparel is recyclable, yet it goes directly to landfills. The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that of the thirteen million tons of textile waste generated in 2010, individuals only recycled fifteen percent.<sup>67</sup> Maintaining fashion sense extends beyond wearing what is in vogue; it includes staying knowledgeable of the latest trends. The majority of this information regarding fashion and countless other topics comes in printed form and thereby requires an enormous amount of paper. Though Americans fare substantially better at recycling this material than textiles, thirty-seven percent of the paper used still reached a landfill in 2010.<sup>68</sup> These two substances alone accounted for nearly thirty-eight million tons of solid waste that year, or roughly fifteen percent of all landfill mass.<sup>69</sup>

Another two percent of all landfill refuse is electronic equipment, frequently termed e-waste. While this category of trash constitutes a miniscule amount of the total

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<sup>67</sup> US Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Resource Conservation and Recovery, “Common Waste and Materials: Textiles,” <http://www.epa.gov/osw/conserves/materials/textiles.htm> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., “Common Waste and Materials: Paper,” Resource Conservation, <http://www.epa.gov/osw/conserves/materials/paper/index.htm> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., Solid Waste and Emergency Response, *Municipal Solid Waste Generation, Recycling, and Disposal in the United States: Facts and Figures for 2010* (Washington, DC, December 2011), 7, Table 2, [http://www.epa.gov/osw/nonhaz/municipal/pubs/msw\\_2010\\_rev\\_factsheet.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/osw/nonhaz/municipal/pubs/msw_2010_rev_factsheet.pdf) (accessed July 7, 2013).

landfill amounts, the components found within electronic devices are particularly hazardous. These include arsenic, flame retardants, lead, mercury, nickel, PVC, silver, and zinc, all of which become potential contaminants of the soil, water, and air.<sup>70</sup> To protect against these toxins and heavy metals affecting multiple eco-systems, twenty-five states have enacted legislation regulating e-waste and its disposal. The majority of these states require manufacturers to pay for the proper recycling of consumers' used electronics.<sup>71</sup> Even though there are laws that mandate e-waste recycling and businesses must accept it, the EPA estimates that only twenty-six percent of all possibly recyclable products were recycled in 2010.<sup>72</sup> This translates into nearly 1.8 billion tons of electronics occupying landfill space rather than being easily and cheaply recycled by consumers.<sup>73</sup>

At the individual level, the amount of trash a person creates may seem small, but the quantity becomes considerable when extended over prolonged periods of time.

Ashley Menger and Sidney Quarrier realized this when they inventoried their own garbage output. In an effort to see how little waste she could create, Menger agreed to

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<sup>70</sup> T. Reed Miller and others, *Characterizing Transboundary Flows of Used Electronics: Summary Report 2012*, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Materials Systems Laboratory, and National Center for Electronics Recycling (January 2012), 15, Table 2, <http://msl.mit.edu/publications/CharacterizingTransboundaryFlowsofUsedElectronicsWorkshopSummaryReport%201-2012.pdf> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>71</sup> Electronics Take Back Coalition, "State Legislation," <http://www.electronicstakeback.com/promote-good-laws/state-legislation/> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>72</sup> The EPA's 2010 estimates are based upon data from previous years. However, thirteen of the twenty-five states with legislation that requires e-waste recycling made it effective on or after 2010. Based upon their own wording, the EPA did not factor this in when estimating the 2010 e-waste disposal tonnage—which should reduce the quantity of electronic products disposed, thereby increasing the percentage of items recycled.

<sup>73</sup> US Environmental Protection Agency, Office of Resource Conservation and Recovery, *Electronics Waste Management in the United States Through 2009* (Washington, DC, May 2011), 26, Table 12, <http://www.epa.gov/osw/conserve/materials/ecycling/docs/fullbaselinereport2011.pdf> (accessed July 7, 2013).

carry her non-recyclable, non-compostable refuse with her for two weeks. She recounts the various places and ways she unsuspectingly encountered garbage in everyday life, from straws in drinks to stay-fresh plastic seals on cottage cheese containers. Although Menger did produce some trash throughout her experiment, after the two weeks she stated that “it’s a fairly small bag. I’d say it’s maybe fifteen inches wide, maybe a foot and a half tall.”<sup>74</sup>

Quarrier’s exercise provides a more extensive look at the average middle-class American consumer’s lifestyle and its impact upon the planet. He calculated both his family’s weekly garbage output and the energy and materials used in making the products he bought. Quarrier recalls trying to estimate both the direct and indirect impact he and his family had had on the planet from 1970 until 1990.

‘I dug out wads of old receipts, weighed trash cans and the daily mail, excavated the basement and shed, and used triangulation techniques I hadn’t practiced since graduate school to estimate the materials we used in the roofing job.’... He visualized a global industrial network of factories making things for him, freighters and trucks transporting them, stores selling them, and office buildings supervising the process. He wondered how much steel and concrete his state needed for the roads, bridges, and parking garages he used. He wondered about resources used by the hospital that cared for him, the air force jets and police cars that protected him, the television stations that entertained him, and the veterinary office that cured his dog. As his list grew, Sid was haunted by an imaginary mountain of discarded televisions, car parts, and barrels of oil...<sup>75</sup>

The magnitude of materials that the average American uses and discards over a given lifetime, multiplied by number of people living in the country, becomes staggering. With attentiveness and vigilance, the quantity of trash is reducible. However, waste—and

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<sup>74</sup> Ashley Menger, interview by Dick Gordon, “Trash Talk,” *The Story*, North Carolina Public Radio, WUNC, November 13, 2007, [http://thestory.org/archive/the\\_story\\_383\\_A\\_Home\\_In\\_The\\_Mall.mp3/view](http://thestory.org/archive/the_story_383_A_Home_In_The_Mall.mp3/view) (accessed September 5, 2012; site now discontinued).

<sup>75</sup> Durning, *How Much Is Enough?*, 20.

consequently pollution by way of landfills—occurs as the natural by-product of obeying the principle of self-defined felicity through consumption.

### **Consumerism and Society**

The ethic of consumerism promotes distinct ideas of personhood and the environment, but it also inculcates an understanding of how individuals ought to relate to one another. A consuming mentality engenders the view that every activity is a means of striving after happiness. However, consuming is a privatized happiness that does not extend to the common good of society. Adopting consumerism's standard affects how a person views their responsibility toward others. Activities like education, volunteering, and one's life-work gain value in direct proportion to the amount of personal happiness they afford rather than the value they contribute to society.

### **Privatization**

While very few would want to identify themselves wholly as consumers, most would agree that their consumption strives at achieving an envisioned "happy life." This entails enjoying a lifestyle that not only keeps up with their neighbors' standards of living, but also affords an appropriate amount of consumable goods advertised by consumerism's marketers. The envisioned happy life encapsulates the relationship between consumerism and the social theory addressed in chapter one: status and association as revealed through consumption. However, it is important to reiterate that what constitutes the happy life is difficult to specify. It is highly individualized and fluctuates according to particular tastes and desires based on many of the qualities of personhood named in the first section of this chapter. Pursuit of the personalized happy

life takes many forms, but perhaps the most commonly extolled avenue is through education.

Historically, studying and learning were means of attaining knowledge in order to develop virtuous character and foster the good of society.<sup>76</sup> Education prepared individuals for work and a career, but it was situated within a paradigm of bettering themselves to contribute to their community. While such an ideal may never have been achieved, there is now even less support for valuing education in its contribution toward understanding of one's self, life, and the world. Instead, schools are seen as economic springboards—a tool students employ in order to actualize a particular consumer quality of life. By and large, undergraduates in the US affirm this as a principal reason for earning their college degree. Seventy-three percent of college freshmen declare that being very well-off financially is “essential” or “very important” to them. In contrast, forty-six percent state that developing a meaningful philosophy of life is an “essential” or “very important” personal goal, a number up from the 2003 low of thirty-nine percent.<sup>77</sup>

Parents, politicians, and even educators emphasize the mission of continuing education as primarily “to provide skills, knowledge, and training to help [students] succeed in the

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<sup>76</sup> While there are other rationales for an educational system, these three represent the influential thoughts of Aristotle, Mill, and Russell. “But as for the education pertaining to the individual, in reference to which he is a good man simply...” Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. Robert C. Bartlett and Susan Collins (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), 1130b, 27-28; “that education and opinion, which have so vast a power over human character, should so use that power as to establish in the mind of every individual an indissoluble association between his own happiness and the good of the whole...” John Stuart Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 2nd ed., ed. George Sher (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2001), 17; and “philosophy, like all other studies, aims primarily at knowledge” Bertrand Russell, *The Problems of Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 154.

<sup>77</sup> John Pryor and others, *The American Freshman: Forty Year Trend: 1966-2006*, Higher Education Research Institute, University of California Los Angeles (Los Angeles, April 2007), 32-33, <http://heri.ucla.edu/PDFs/pubs/TFS/Trends/Monographs/TheAmericanFreshman40YearTrends.pdf> (accessed July 7, 2013).

working world.”<sup>78</sup> Universities publish their graduation rates and job placement statistics to attract students, and many of their departments report the average starting salaries of their recent graduates. This suggests that educational institutions affirm—or at least acquiesce to—the mindset that success in the working world is tied to individuals’ financial resources which increase their ability to consume. Max Oelschlager believes this is because “the research university less and less leads society in new directions and instead more and more reflects society’s established characteristics.”<sup>79</sup>

The privatization encouraged by the ethic of consumerism is more than seeing secondary education as a means to financial prosperity; it impacts students’ altruistic behaviors as well. A 1998 Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) survey<sup>80</sup> found that ninety-one percent of survey participants engaged in some form of community service because they believed it very important to help other people. Additionally, seventy percent also stated they took part for personal satisfaction<sup>81</sup> while only thirteen percent chose “to enhance my resume” as a very important reason for serving. While not diminishing the work college student volunteers perform in their communities, these numbers illustrate how even they perceive some of their best actions as partially self-serving. However, when community service changed from a voluntary action to a course

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<sup>78</sup> Paul Taylor, *Is College Worth It?* PewResearchCenter (Washington, DC, May 2011), 3, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/files/2011/05/higher-ed-report.pdf> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>79</sup> Max Oelschlager *Caring for Creation* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1994), 198.

<sup>80</sup> Although the study focuses on students who perform volunteer services, it also found a relevant factor regarding the type of student least likely to participate in service: “One of the more interesting self-selection factors was the importance that the student gave to making more money as a reason for attending college, which was the only negative predictor of becoming a volunteer during college.” Alexander W. Astin and Linda J. Sax, “How Undergraduates Are Affected by Service Participation,” *Journal of College Student Development* 39, no. 3 (1998): 253, <http://cshe.berkeley.edu/events/seru21symposium2005/papers/sax2.pdf> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 255, Table 2.

requirement, the numbers changed dramatically. A 2000 HERI study found “somewhat surprisingly, more than half of the students (fifty-five percent) admitted that they took the [service learning] course in part ‘to enhance my resume/application’ (about equally divided between ‘major’ and ‘minor’ reasons).”<sup>82</sup> While the rationale for serving differs between these two groups of students, a majority of them volunteer to fulfill their attempts at the happy life.

Since ideas of a happy life is a factor motivating people to pursue higher education and volunteer, it is understandable that people see their jobs as a means of attaining the happy life. This offers one explanation for why people devote so much time to their jobs.<sup>83</sup> The 1938 Fair Labor Standards Act mandates a maximum forty-four hour work week; however, full-time US employees work an average of forty-five hour a week.<sup>84</sup> In addition to this, most workers do not take the vacation time they rightfully earn. CNN cites an Expedia.com survey that finds “the average employed American worker got eighteen vacation days last year, but only used fourteen of those desirable days off.”<sup>85</sup> Certainly the increase in work time is partly in response to the economic recession; workers stay late and accept overtime to “prove” their worthiness to the company in an effort to avoid being laid off. However, people also work more because of

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<sup>82</sup> Alexander W. Astin and others, *How Service Learning Affects Students*, Higher Education Research Institute, University of California Los Angeles (Los Angeles, January, 2000), 46, <http://heri.ucla.edu/pdfs/hslas/hslas.pdf> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>83</sup> It is important to state from the beginning that many factors influence why people work the way they do, including the fact that employers set the number of hours an employee must work in order to maintain employed.

<sup>84</sup> Mary Allard and Marianne Janes, “Time Use of Working Parents: A Visual Essay,” *Monthly Labor Review* 131, no. 6 (2008): 7, <http://www.bls.gov/opub/mlr/2008/06/art1full.pdf>. (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>85</sup> Jessica Dickler, “\$67 Billion in Vacation Days, Out the Window,” *CNNMoney*, May 25, 2001, [http://money.cnn.com/2011/05/25/pf/unused\\_vacation\\_days/index.htm](http://money.cnn.com/2011/05/25/pf/unused_vacation_days/index.htm) (accessed July 7, 2013).



the debt they have accumulated as they strive to obtain their self-defined happiness through consuming.

Juliet Schor names this America's cycle of "work and spend." Due to the nation's innovation, technology, and education, the per capital incomes of US citizens have nearly quadrupled since 1980.<sup>86</sup> However, workers did not save that money. Instead, they shopped.

Our houses have doubled in size, we have become a nation of two car families, the goods and services that we produce, that we consume, have increased dramatically, we have air conditioning today, many of us have swimming pools—we have all sorts of things ... that we all didn't have a few decades ago.<sup>87</sup>

The cycle of work and spend maintains the ethic of consumerism. Abundance—and overabundance all the more so—aims at the happy life. The (widespread) acceptance of this belief offers one explanation for why the country had a \$2.5 trillion personal credit debt prior to the 2008 economic downturn.<sup>88</sup> By 2009, US consumers reduced this form of outstanding debt by \$100 billion; yet with the recovery of the economy, the 2012 outstanding consumer credit levels have surpassed the 2008 figures by nine percent.<sup>89</sup>

Although Americans spend the majority of their earnings on themselves and their

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<sup>86</sup> Information Please, "Per Capita Personal Income by State," Pearson Education, Inc., 2010, <http://www.infoplease.com/ipa/A0104652.html> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>87</sup> Juliet Schor, "The Decline of Leisure in America," *Vital Speeches of the Day* 60, no. 24 (1994), <http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-16389064/decline-leisure-time-america.html> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>88</sup> Board of Governors of the Federal Reserve System, "Consumer Credit Outstanding," April 2013, <http://www.federalreserve.gov/releases/g19/current/default.htm> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. Consumer debt looks different from 2008 when forty percent of consumer debt was in the form of revolving credit (i.e., credit cards, personal loans, home equity loans, etc.); today, it is down to thirty-one percent.

families,<sup>90</sup> people are still generous. They gave nearly \$218 billion in 2011, which equates to every person giving approximately \$777 to some form of philanthropic organization.<sup>91</sup> While Americans are generous, much of this money goes to associations that reinvest a large portion of that donation back into the communities from which it came. Nearly half of the total contributions went to religion (thirty-two percent) and education (thirteen percent).<sup>92</sup> As with community service, many who donate to such non-profits know that a portion of their gifts will directly or indirectly impact their own families and immediate neighbors.<sup>93</sup> This is not to dismiss either the generosity of the giver or the work of the organizations; it is only to illustrate how an ethic of consumerism can engender an attitude of privatization even in generosity.

### Common Good

A focus on the good of one's community tends to diminish as people develop a growing preoccupation with their personal well-being. Individuals' private pursuits attenuate their concern for society and all of its members. For example, American individuals donated approximately \$218 billion to various philanthropic organizations in

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<sup>90</sup> Michelle Nichols, "U.S. Charitable Giving Approaches \$300 Billion in 2011," *Reuters* June 19, 2011, <http://in.reuters.com/article/2012/06/19/usa-charity-idINL1E8HI6HW20120619> (accessed July 7, 2013). "[A Giving USA Foundation and the Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University report] found that individual giving accounted for 1.9 percent of disposable income last year, the same as in 2010 and 2009, still below a high of 2.4 percent seen in 2005."

<sup>91</sup> Giving USA Foundation, *Giving USA: The Annual Report on Philanthropy for the Year 2011 (2012)/Executive Summary*, Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University (Indianapolis, 2012), 8, <http://store.givingusareports.org/2012-C8.aspx> (accessed July 7, 2013). This total comes from dividing the 2011 charitable contributions of individuals and bequests—not foundations and corporations—as estimated by The Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University (\$242.2 billion) by the US Census Bureau's 2011 population estimate of 311.6 million people.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>93</sup> Those who donate to religious and educational institutions likely have some ties to the non-profits to whom they are giving.

2011; that same year they spent \$162 billion on alcoholic beverages.<sup>94</sup> They laid out an additional \$98 billion on tobacco sales, despite the constantly growing excise tax placed upon it,<sup>95</sup> and people spent \$19.5 billion on chocolate.<sup>96</sup> Americans committed more money to these three personal expenditures than they gave to all benevolent charities combined.

People are discovering that a continuously consumptive lifestyle has consequences that negatively affect the body, leading Americans to spend more on battling its effects. Owing to the nation's great affluence and its quantity of inexpensive foods, a significant percentage of the population is overweight and/or obese. People struggling to become more physically fit paid \$19.5 billion to fitness centers and gyms,<sup>97</sup> and "the weight loss and diet control industry was approximately \$60 billion dollars in 2009."<sup>98</sup> However, mitigating the physical effects of continuous consumption entails more than decreasing cellulite amounts; it also includes attempts at masking the exhaustion caused by overworking. In an effort to boost energy and productivity, "the average American drinks 3.1 cups of coffee each day [which] contributes to the massive \$18 billion US coffee market (the global coffee market is worth upwards of \$80 billion

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<sup>94</sup> US Department of Agriculture, Economic Research Service, "Food Expenditures," Table 4, <http://www.ers.usda.gov/data-products/food-expenditures.aspx#26654> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>95</sup> Dennis Cauchon, "Tax Hike Cuts Tobacco Consumption," *USA Today*, September 13, 2012, <http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/nation/story/2012-09-10/cigarette-tax-smoking/57737774/1> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>96</sup> Crystal Lindell, "Report: \$19.5 Billion in U.S. Chocolate Sales," *Candy Industry*, January 30, 2012, <http://www.candyindustry.com/articles/85215-report---19-5-billion-in-chocolate-sales-and-20--growth-in-organic> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>97</sup> Partnership Capital Growth, "Sports & Fitness," Market Statistics, <http://www.pcg-advisors.com/marketstatistics> (access July 7, 2013).

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, "Health & Wellness."

dollars).”<sup>99</sup> To appear refreshed and beautiful, men and women bought \$36.5 billion worth of cosmetic and beauty products in 2010.<sup>100</sup> In an ironic twist, people buy continually more in order to minimize the results of a consumptive lifestyle.

It is a tenuous proposition to establish people’s priorities toward the common good based on how they spend their discretionary income. Certainly the approach has its weaknesses. On the one hand, it takes estimated averages and generalizes them onto the entire population. People’s consumptive behaviors vary for multiple reasons, and consumption statistics do not explain the reasons behind why individuals buy the products they do. In addition, numbers do not allow people to tell their story as they might present it themselves. When having to intentionally make a choice between using the same ten dollars for personal extras or a pressing charitable need, how individuals use their money might look very different. But the lack of intentionality is also the strength of the statistical approach. It avoids placing consumers in a moral conundrum between what they want to do and what they feel they ought to do. It offers a look at how people spend their money uninhibitedly in daily life instead of on a survey or study where responders may perceive certain choices as more socially or morally preferable. Mean expenditures and charitable donations offer a look into the unconscious attitudes consumers have toward others in society.

Financial assistance is not the only way to actualize the common good; time spent

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<sup>99</sup> Carson Adley, “Facts and Statistics about Coffee Consumption in the United States,” The CoffeeMarvel, May 11, 2010, <http://www.coffeemarvel.com/blog/post/2010/05/11/Facts-and-Statistics-about-Coffee-Consumption-in-the-United-States.aspx> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>100</sup> Becca Lipman, “The Economic Slump Hasn’t Kept Women from Splurging on Makeup,” *Business Insider*, July 26, 2011, [http://articles.businessinsider.com/2011-07-26/strategy/30038487\\_1\\_cosmetics-and-toiletries-avon-products-sephora#ixzz21Q0ZmGre](http://articles.businessinsider.com/2011-07-26/strategy/30038487_1_cosmetics-and-toiletries-avon-products-sephora#ixzz21Q0ZmGre) (accessed July 7, 2013).

physically helping others also contributes to society. On the individual level, this includes caring for and helping non-family members, engaging in civic responsibilities like jury duty and voting, and volunteering with non-religious, non-profit organizations. Drawing upon the Bureau of Labor Statistics' "American Time Use Survey—2012," people spend approximately twenty minutes a day in one of these activities that benefit their community.<sup>101</sup> Yet not all people participate equally; only seventeen percent of the population age fifteen and over engages in one of these tasks. This number shrinks to only six percent when the category "caring for and helping nonhousehold members" is removed. In comparison, the same survey notes that forty-two percent of the population spends almost forty-five minutes a day "purchasing goods and services."<sup>102</sup> Like charitable contributions, the help an individual gives to others based on this ethic of consumerism is about personal happiness regardless of its benefit to society.

### **The Religious Ethic of Consumerism**

This chapter describes multiple behaviors that are summarized by the ethic of consumerism, identified here as self-defined happiness through consuming. This definition allows people to construct their own understandings of felicity without limiting the means or the ends that constitute this happy life. If individuals find joy in assuring that their purchases agree with their moral standards, they may practice conviction consumerism. On the other hand, people may buy, unconcerned by a product's origins or its effects on those around them, shielded by the privatization the ethic of consumerism allows. As discussed in chapter two, the doctrine of consumerism advocates the continual

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<sup>101</sup> US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *American Time Use Survey—2012 Results* (Washington, DC, June 2013), 9, Table 1, <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/atus.pdf> (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>102</sup> Ibid.

desire for more; its ethic avails a person toward her or his personal happiness.

Like the other dimensions, the ethical dimension of consumerism interconnects in various ways with Ninian Smart's other religious categories. Perhaps the most evident overlap exists with the social dimension. Politicians, economists, business managers, advertisers, and the general population all promulgate and acquiesce to consumerism's happiness ethos. Its marketer-evangelists spend billions of dollars refining the best ways to advertise how their product will make consumers' lives happier, while the masses seek happiness in the goods preached to them. Virtually every commercial teaches ideas of right and wrong behaviors toward this happy life—often in conflict with each other, illustrating the many paths to happiness—to reinforce how bliss comes through consumption. Sometimes the product itself provides the delight, and at other times the merchandise functions as a conduit for realizing a person's happiness.

Closely bound to the ethical and social aspects of consumerism is its experiential dimension. Consumerists act in ways that promote their happiness through buying. While many studies show that Americans have gained no more happiness despite consuming nearly twice the amount as they did in 1957, this research also admits that people's happiness levels have not decreased either.<sup>103</sup> Buying goods does not feel odious to most people; they willingly stand in lines that wrap around the store to purchase the latest technology or get a great deal. In fact, surveys find that “ninety-three percent of teenagers claim shopping is their favorite pastime.”<sup>104</sup> The simple experience of going to the mall often gives individuals feelings of joy—and all the more so when they spend their money

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<sup>103</sup> United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report*, 1998, 2.

<sup>104</sup> Sallie McFague, *Life Abundant* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2001), 84.

on a consumable good that represents who they are.

The ethic of consumerism proposes to bestow happiness upon those who believe in it. It makes no difference whether consumerism fulfills this promise. Neither does it matter that consumerism's disciples differ in the ways they observe its ethic. As long as people's actions are community-approved interpretations of the doctrine being promulgated, they reside within the fold. This ethic of self-defined happiness, in conjunction with Smart's other six dimensions of the sacred explored in chapter two, qualifies consumerism as a religion.

Having demonstrated how consumerism descriptively fits within the category of religion fulfills the first objective of this study. Consumerism can be appropriately named a religion. However, the other purpose of this study is to compare the religions of consumerism and Christianity. The next chapter does this by examining consumerism—particularly its ethical dimension—in light of a neighbor love ethic based on Christianity.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### A CHRISTIAN ETHICAL PERSPECTIVE AND THE ETHIC OF CONSUMERISM

All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need. —Acts 4:32-35

While the previous chapters have examined consumerism as a religion in both function and form, what remains is to address its relationship to Christianity. While the two religions offer similar expressions of several of Ninian Smart's religious dimensions, their ethical dimensions are antithetical to one another. To show this, it is necessary to put forth a Christian ethic in order to compare it with an ethic of consumerism. The Christian ethic will need to address the same topics as consumerism, namely the categories of personhood, society, and the environment. The Christian teaching of neighbor love meets these criteria.

In order to consider a neighbor love ethic in contradistinction with the ethic of self-defined happiness through consuming, it is important to show how loving one's neighbor is the foundation of a social ethic for Christians. While there are various ways to establish the primacy of this ethic across the diversity of Christian communities, this chapter attends to an ethic of neighbor love from an Evangelical Christian perspective.



Evangelicals prioritize scripture and reason in their theology,<sup>1</sup> an emphasis Gerald McDermott, Kevin Vanhooser and other Evangelicals acknowledge.<sup>2</sup> Because of this, these two sources are given attention here. After showing how scripture and reason confirm neighbor love, the chapter offers a description of how Christians have understood the implications of this ethic for notions of personhood, society, and the environment.

### **A Christian Ethical Perspective: Neighbor Love**

A neighbor love ethic is paradigmatic for Evangelicals as it expresses one of their fundamental tenets: the preeminence of scripture.<sup>3</sup> For the Evangelical, the Bible is the final authority on all matters great and small. Its words are God's revelation set down in writing to provide humanity with knowledge of God and to guide Christian living. Because of this view of scripture, the Jesus of the New Testament is the exemplar par excellence of neighbor love in the life he led and what he taught. While Evangelicals disagree about whether other New Testament writings share the same importance as the words of Jesus, they all agree that Christ's teachings are significant for the believer.

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<sup>1</sup> Tradition supersedes reason for Evangelicals if it means the acts of the early Church recorded in the Bible or the Apostle's Creed. However, tradition contains the idea of formalized "rules, regulations, and rituals" which Evangelicals eschew from fear of "confusing our current traditions with orthodoxy." Rick Warren, *Purpose Driven Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1995), 284.

<sup>2</sup> Gerald McDermott, "Evangelicals Divided," *First Things* (April 2011), <http://www.firstthings.com/article/2011/03/evangelicals-divided/> (accessed July 7, 2013); Kevin Vanhooser, *The Drama of Doctrine* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005), 233.

<sup>3</sup> While Tony Campolo does not represent of all Evangelicalism, the three criteria that he posits offers an acceptable delineation of what an Evangelical believes. These are "belief in the doctrines set down in the Apostle's Creed...; [that] the writers of Scripture... were invaded by the Holy Spirit and were uniquely guided by God as they wrote, providing us with an infallible guide for faith and practice...; [and] that the historical Jesus can be alive and present to each and every person, and that salvation depends on yielding to Him and inviting Him to be a vital, transforming presence in our lives" (22-23). Tony Campolo, *Red Letter Christians* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 2008).

Therefore, serious effort is given toward integrating the Gospels into all aspects of one's life. Neighbor love becomes a prominent ethic because Jesus teaches it specifically.<sup>4</sup>

A key teaching of scripture is the command to love the neighbor; however, there are two comments that need to be made concerning Evangelicals and the neighbor love ethic. The first concerns motivation. Why should the Christian love her or his neighbor? The second involves the expression of this ethic. How should the Christian love his or her neighbor? The answers Evangelicals give to these questions affects their understanding of a Christian ethic, including the neighbor love ethic proposed here.

Loving one's neighbor is framed within the context of obedience to God. For the Evangelical, love for the other "is God's ultimate test of the reality of our religion. 'If a man has not the love of God shed abroad in his heart,' cried D. L. Moody, 'he has never been regenerated.' 'He that loveth not knoweth not God; for God is love' (1 Jn 4:8)."<sup>5</sup>The gospel of John makes the connection between loving others and loving God explicit within the context of Christian theology: the Father and Jesus are one. Based on this belief, obeying Jesus is tantamount to obeying God. Therefore, when Jesus declares that "they who have my commandments and keep them are those who love me" (Jn 14:21), and "this is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you" (Jn 15:12), Evangelicals conclude that loving one another is obedience to God. It is love for God that compels love for one's neighbors.

While devotion to God induces a love of neighbors, the expression of neighbor love varies because it is guided by reason. Intellect, rationality, and good sense are

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<sup>4</sup> Not everyone agrees that love provides the best overarching theme for New Testament ethics. For example, Richard Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), 200-203, posits that the cross provides a better focal image.

<sup>5</sup> James S. Stewart, *The Life and Teachings of Jesus Christ* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1992), 143.

gracious gifts from God to humanity,<sup>6</sup> which provide the knowledge of how to demonstrate this ethic. For Christianity, a religion that is regarded as transcending time and culture, enacting neighbor love is subject to continual interpretation and application. C.S. Lewis captures this idea in his discussion of the Golden Rule: “Christianity has not, and does not profess to have, a detailed political programme for applying ‘Do as you would be done by’ to a particular society at a particular moment. It could not have. It is meant for all men at all times and the particular programme which suited one place or time would not suit another.”<sup>7</sup> While the Golden Rule is distinct from a neighbor love ethic, both presume that mentally and emotionally rational individuals have the ability to discern how they ought to enact these teachings. Therefore, there is no single historical or cultural practice that embodies this ethic.

Christian neighbor love is a virtue. It is “a pattern of dispositions anchored in the Gospel that guide the moral agent to recognize action which is consonant with the biblical exemplar.”<sup>8</sup> For the Evangelical, the biblical account of the life of Jesus presents the quintessential example of virtue, and appropriate behaviors are determinable by answering Charles Sheldon’s question, “What would Jesus do?”<sup>9</sup> This does not serve as an ethical rule. Christians recognize that they are living in a completely different era and

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<sup>6</sup> This “high regard” of human reason comes from Romans 1:20: “For since the creation of the world God’s invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.” Paul argues that God is knowable apart from divine revelation, a view likely influenced by his Hellenistic education where “Paul was exposed to the various strands of Greek philosophy, which formed part of the intellectual equipment of every educated person.” Jerome Murphy-O’Connor, *Paul* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 51.

<sup>7</sup> C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (New York: HarperCollins, 2000), 82.

<sup>8</sup> William Spohn, *What Are They Saying about Scripture and Ethics?* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1995), 107.

<sup>9</sup> While a popular acronym at the turn of the twenty-first century, this phrase originally comes from Charles Sheldon, *In His Steps* (Chicago: Advance Publishing, 1898).

culture than Jesus. The question becomes, “How does the Christian, who is living centuries after the writing of the Bible, know how to enact the example Jesus gave?” What does it mean to love one’s neighbor today? Neighbor love is “a genuine life of love toward others [that] requires persistent careful work on our part.”<sup>10</sup>

Evangelicals employ reason to engage in what William Spohn calls the act of “analogy-making.” Analogy-making is the process of studying the meaning, the situation, and the audience of the biblical writers and then thinking through how their writings apply to Christians today. While Evangelicals affirm the biblical texts as infallible, they also understand that scripture was written within a historical context which forms its content. The life and circumstances of Jesus are not identical to those of his followers today. In his discussion on this hermeneutical task of metaphor-making,<sup>11</sup> Richard Hays states, “The temporal gap between the first-century Christians and Christians at the end of the twentieth century can be bridged only by a spark of the imagination.”<sup>12</sup> Christian imagination, framed by scripture and reason, allows “Jesus of Nazareth [to function] normatively as a **concrete universal**, because his particular story embodies a paradigmatic pattern which has universal applicability.... Christians move imaginatively from his story to their new situation by analogical reasoning.”<sup>13</sup>

Before addressing the ways Christians have enacted a neighbor love ethic through analogy-making, it is appropriate to show that scripture supports this method. Jesus

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<sup>10</sup> Robin Lovin, *Christian Ethics*, Abingdon Essential Guides (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2000), 79.

<sup>11</sup> Hays, *The Moral Vision*, notes the distinction between analogy-making and metaphor-making, and, like him, “I will not distinguish sharply between them” (311, note 8).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 302.

<sup>13</sup> William Spohn, *Scripture and Ethics?*, 102. Bold type his.

expected his followers to analogically imagine neighbor love. Therefore, this is not a systematic argument attempting to substantiate a neighbor love ethic. Theologians like Augustine, Bonhoeffer, and others have already done this far better than what could be accomplished in this space.<sup>14</sup> Instead, the focus is on demonstrating how Jesus and Paul presume the act of analogy-making for those attempting to love their neighbors.

### Neighbor Love and Jesus

Throughout the gospels, Jesus charges his followers to love one another, their neighbors, and their enemies. While this directive comes in the form of a command, at times, loving another is expressed in the form of a narrative. The synoptic gospel writers present a situation in which a question arises concerning what one ought to do or how one ought to live, and Jesus responds with a story. This type of moral discourse is what James Gustafson calls narrative discourse. Narrative discourse rarely offers a direct answer to such moral questions; rather,

narrative evokes the imagination, stimulates our moral sensibilities and affections. Its conclusion is not as clearly decisive, but it enlarges one's vision of what is going on; one acts in its "light" more than conformity to it—as one does to a casuistic moral argument. It often assumes an analogy between the story or parable and the circumstances out of which the question comes.

Gustafson's category of narrative discourse provides a helpful means for understanding the stories of Jesus. They are not action steps to be followed point-by-point; they express a disposition that individuals must analogously imagine in their own lives.

Matthew (22:34-40), Mark (12:28-34), and Luke (10:25-37) each recount a story about Jesus being asked which of the Torah's 613 commandments is the greatest. This

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<sup>14</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. R.P.H Green (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 4, *Discipleship*, ed. Geoffrey Kelly and John Godsey, trans. Barbara Green and Reinhard Krauss (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996).

was not an unusual question at the time of Jesus.<sup>15</sup> Jesus responds by stating that the law is summarized in two commands: Love the Lord God with one's whole being (Dt 6:4) and love one's neighbor as oneself (Lv 19:18). While the three synoptic writers present this dual love command as the accurate recapitulation of the Hebrew scriptures, Luke's version of the greatest commandment gives an extended narrative discourse on neighbor love.

The Lukan story begins with an expert in the law inquiring of Jesus how to inherit eternal life. Jesus responds by asking the lawyer how he understands the Torah, to which the man states, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind"; and "Love your neighbor as yourself." (Lk 10:27). Jesus commends the expert for "answering correctly," but unlike the Matthean and Markan accounts, in Luke, the conversation continues. The expert of the law wants to know to whom this love command extends and so asks, "Who is my neighbor?" Jesus answers with the story of the Good Samaritan.

In this story, a man was robbed and left for dead on his way from Jerusalem. Members of two different Jewish religious groups, in their efforts to avoid the victim, passed by the man on the other side of the road. Then, a Samaritan, viewed by Jews as ethnically inferior, came upon the robbed man, helped the victim, and paid to have the man looked after as he recovers. Jesus concluded his story and then asked the expert of the law a counter-question: which of the three characters best demonstrated neighbor love to the man who fell into the hands of robbers? When the expert in the law replied, "The one who had mercy on him," Jesus told him, "Go and do likewise" (Lk 10:37).

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<sup>15</sup> Jewish scholars Shammai and Hillel were also asked similar questions. See Daniel Harrington and James Keenan, *Jesus and Virtue Ethics* (Lanham, MD: Sheed & Ward, 2002), 78.

Luke's story does not conclude with a list of duties that one is to follow, but rather a disposition the Christian is to have. Jesus asks his interlocutor to identify which of the characters' actions demonstrated love. With the parting injunction to go and do likewise, Jesus invites the lawyer to rethink himself as neighbor to others. The conversation between the lawyer and Jesus subtly moves from "Who is my neighbor?" to "Who behaved as a neighbor?" The issue is recast for the expert to see neighbor as a descriptor of the person committed to a virtue ethic of love. As Paul Ramsey posits, "a shift is made from defining the qualities of the man who rightfully ought to be loved to the specific demand that the questioner himself become a neighbor."<sup>16</sup>

The story of the Good Samaritan exemplifies the Christian neighbor love ethic, but how disciples act out this virtue is culturally conditioned. Followers of Christ must create an analogy between their lives and the example of the Samaritan as they rethink themselves as neighbors.

Jesus laid on his disciples the responsibility of making individual application of the underlying principle. Thus, when Jesus concluded his parable of the good Samaritan by saying, "Go and do likewise" (Lk 10:39), he did not mean, "Wait until a precisely identical situation turns up, and then obey my instructions"; he meant that man should live in such a spirit that he will respond almost instinctively to meet the varied needs of others.<sup>17</sup>

The art of analogy-making aids individuals as they attempt to enact the second half of the dual command. At times, Christians imagine poor (and sometimes wrong) analogies of neighbor love; however, this does not excuse the disciple from analogy-making. Instead,

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<sup>16</sup> Paul Ramsey, *Basic Christian Ethics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 93.

<sup>17</sup> Bruce Metzger, *The New Testament: Its Background, Growth, and Content* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1983), 161.

believers' devotion to God should encourage them to strive for creating and actualizing better analogies.

Since Jesus is the exemplar par excellence for the Christian life, it is important to note that he presumed the act of analogy-making throughout the synoptic Gospels. He offered parables to convey ideas concerning the kingdom of God and provided similes to describe his eschatological return. With regard to the idea that Jesus expected an analogous imagining of neighbor love, Matthew 25 provides an archetype of his teachings on the matter. In this passage, Jesus declares that the nations will be separated according to how they assisted the lowliest of his own.<sup>18</sup> Some will inherit eternal life while others will go away for eternal punishment. He enumerates multiple activities that distinguish the “sheep” from the “goats”: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, sheltering the stranger, clothing the naked, and visiting the prisoner. While a prescriptive reading of these admonitions offers rules for Christians to live ethically, the point would seem otherwise based on the shock the people in the story express. Neither of the two parties faces judgment on criteria they are expecting, nor do they recognize Jesus as the beneficiary of their acts. In this teaching, Jesus holds compassionate love administered toward others as the measure by which the King makes his decisions. Their separation to the right or to the left surprises them both. Again, the writers show Jesus calling people to

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<sup>18</sup> It is interesting that Matthew uses the Greek phrase ‘my brothers’ (τούτων τῶν ἀδελφῶν μου τῶν ἐλαχίστων) in verse 40 when discussing to whom the sheep gave aid. However, when addressing those who did not help the least, he omits ‘my brothers’ making the lowliest the object of kindness (τούτων τῶν ἐλαχίστων) rather than his lowliest brothers. While this could have theological significance (to whom should Christians give help—anyone who is socially insignificant or only believers meeting this description?), such fastidiousness disregards the New Testament model of love that extends to the righteous, the neighbor, and even the enemy.



loving others, actions that “might fitly answer to that narration and participate in the truth that it tells.”<sup>19</sup>

### Neighbor Love and Paul

While the Gospels present loving one’s neighbor as a practice in analogy-making, so does the Apostle Paul. In his letters to the churches in Galatia and Rome, Paul reiterates Jesus’s teaching that loving one’s neighbor sums up the entirety of the Jewish Law. To the Galatians, Paul is writing against the need to add Jewish rituals to validate faith in Christ. He reminds the Galatians that the Mosaic Law is not about circumcision or holy days. It is summed up in a single command: “love your neighbor as yourself” (Gal 5:14). He writes this same message to the church in Rome:

Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for he who loves his fellowman has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not covet,’ and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ Love does no harm to its neighbor. Therefore love is the fulfillment of the law.<sup>20</sup>

Paul does not offer a precise methodology for enacting neighbor love; there is no checklist of sanctioned activities. He relies on his readers’ abilities to determine how loving one’s neighbor will look based on living a life given to the Lord Jesus Christ (Rom 13:14 and Gal 5:22-23).

By leaving the concrete particulars of the practice of neighbor love open, Paul allows for freedom in analogy-making. Love is more than a prescribed set of behaviors; it is the Christian disposition that guides the believer’s actions. In his letters to the Romans and Galatians, Paul argues that “faith expressing itself through love” is the means to

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<sup>19</sup> Hays, *Moral Vision*, 298.

<sup>20</sup> Rom 13:8-10.

fulfill the Mosaic Law (Gal 5:6). Rather than observing a series of prescribed behaviors, Paul offers the churches a pattern of dispositions that begins with love (Gal 5:22).

Thomas Tobin posits that Romans 13:8-10 and Galatians 5:14 are parts of larger exhortations “in which Paul is urging believers to practice a series of virtues, all of which fall under the general principle of love. For Paul, the practice of these virtues, which are rooted in, and derived from, love of neighbor, represents the ‘fulfillment’ of the law but not its observance.”<sup>21</sup> Paul wants his readers to understand neighbor love not as the most orthodox observation of the Law, but as the most complete achievement of what the law intended to accomplish.

Both the Gospels and the Pauline epistles support the view that loving one’s neighbor is a disposition patterned after Jesus, the writers of which expect the practice of this ethic to be analogously imagined. Matthew, Mark, and Luke each declare the believer’s greatest commitments are to love God and to love neighbor, and each makes use of analogical techniques throughout their writings to illustrate how Christians might manifest these dual loves. The apostle Paul also reminds his readers to love one another throughout his various letters, particularly in Romans and Galatians where neighbor love is the summation of the Mosaic Law. This is because Paul identifies love as the chief virtue that binds all the other virtues together (Col 3:14).

These examples demonstrate how scripture identifies neighbor love as the means to fulfill the law, and reason provides knowledge for how to express this love to one’s neighbor appropriately. Neighbor love is principally expressed through an analogical

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<sup>21</sup> Tobin provides a solid argument for how “on linguistic grounds and on the basis of the overall argument of Paul’s exhortation in Gal 5:1-6:10, that he clearly did not mean by ‘fulfilling’ the law the same thing as its observance... Like Gal 5:14, Rom 13:8-10 is part of a larger exhortation (12:1-13:14).” *Paul’s Rhetoric in its Contexts* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2004), 402.

process. Through this practice, Christians determine how to translate a neighbor love ethic into praxis. The art of analogy-making is necessary for Christians today in their attempt to enact neighbor love. It is the same method Christians have used as they have engaged in loving one's neighbor. Before considering the ethic of neighbor love with the ethic of consumerism, it is beneficial to address how a neighbor love ethic has influenced understandings of personhood, society, and the environment.

### **Understanding Personhood, Society, and the Environment within a Neighbor Love Ethic**

Having shown in scripture the place of analogy-making for expressing a neighbor love ethic, what follows is a look at three categories in which Christians have imaginatively practiced neighbor love: personhood, society, and the environment. These categories are broad, and Christians vary in both their identification of these categories and their practice of neighbor love within them. There is great diversity in how believers enact neighbor love in relationship to personhood, society, and the environment, so for the sake of brevity, one theologian's approach will suffice to illustrate each category. First, Walter Rauschenbusch discusses the worth of human personality, seeing personhood as important because Jesus valued the individual. Next, with regard to society, Thomas Aquinas emphasizes a Christian conception of the common good based on a notion of neighbor love. Last, James Nash addresses how neighbor love can impact Christians' attitudes toward planetary care and stewardship of the environment.

#### **Neighbor Love and Personhood**

Just as in consumerism, Christianity engenders a concept of personhood through the categories of conviction and liberty. Acting in accordance with convictions has

marked Christians' behavior from the religion's beginnings. In the book of Acts, Peter and John argued with the Sanhedrin that they ought to obey God despite whatever physical punishments might befall them for disobeying human authority (4:19). Martyrs have continued this tradition by sacrificing their lives for their conviction of faith. The apostle Paul also addresses ideas of liberty in his various letters. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul writes concerning the religious freedom believers have in Christ. Within this discussion, he encourages slaves to gain their physical freedom if it is within their power (7:21). Similarly, Paul's epistle to Philemon is about receiving Onesimus back "no longer as a slave, but better than a slave, as a dear brother" (16). These views of conviction and liberty may differ from those within consumerism, but the New Testament identifies these as expressions of personhood.

While Christianity and consumerism both promote liberty and conviction as part of personhood, Christianity goes further and finds intrinsic worth in every human life. This value of human life stems from the biblical creation story found in Genesis. The narrative begins with God hovering above the deep and calling the universe into existence. The Creator separates the light from the darkness. Then God divides the land from the water. After filling the earth with living creatures of every type, God says, "Let us make man in our image, in our likeness... So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them." (Gn 1:26-27). It is within these short passages that Christians identify all persons as having value because humanity is created in the *imago Dei*. This dignity of human life has contributed to Christians serving the poor and sick in numerous ways for millennia. This high regard for human beings within Christianity is even leveled as a critique by some. Lynn White, for

example, posits that “Christianity is the most anthropocentric religion the world has seen.”<sup>22</sup> Whether or not one agrees with the extent of White’s assertion, he is correct in recognizing the great value Christians give to human life.

Walter Rauschenbusch has written on the sacredness of human life and personality. He identifies personhood as a fundamental social principle of Jesus. Rauschenbusch finds within the Gospels an image of Jesus who affirms this belief in both words and deeds. Because of this, Rauschenbusch encourages his readers to maintain the same value for other’s lives based on the example of Jesus.

Rauschenbusch looks to the Sermon on the Mount to show Jesus’s view of the sacredness of life. In his discussion of a series of social questions concerning human-to-human interactions, Jesus tells his listeners that “anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment,” and “anyone who says to his brother, ‘Raca,’ is answerable to the Sanhedrin. But anyone who says, ‘You fool!’ will be in danger of the fire of hell.” (Mt 5:22). In Rauschenbusch’s mind, Jesus admonishes individuals’ feelings of anger toward others in such strong terms because he holds the person in such high value. In his commentary on this passage, Rauschenbusch declares, “To abuse a man with words of contempt denies his worth, breaks down his self-respect, and robs him of the regard of others. It is an attempt to murder his soul. The horror which Jesus feels for such action is an expression of his own respect for the worth of personality.”<sup>23</sup>

For Rauschenbusch, it is the same high regard of the human person that explains Jesus’s teaching on the treatment of one’s adversaries. Jesus commands his followers to

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<sup>22</sup> Lynn White, “The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis,” *Science* 155, no. 3767 (1967): 1205.

<sup>23</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *The Social Principles of Jesus* (Nashville, TN: WordStream, 2011), 5.

“love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of your father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and unrighteous” (Mt 5:44-45). Jesus recognizes God’s love for humanity, and he reminds his listeners of this throughout his exegesis of the Law in the Sermon on the Mount. Taking his cue from Jesus, Rauschenbusch posits that it is not enough to have affection for others based on reciprocity. Disciples who want to be like God must see their enemies as persons whom God loves and extend love to their adversaries.<sup>24</sup>

Jesus identified the divine worth in human life as more than a theoretical proposition; he acted upon this belief. Rauschenbusch sees this occurring in the story of the woman caught in adultery, who was brought to Jesus in the book of John. When the teachers of the Law asked Jesus what should be done to the woman, Rauschenbusch states that Jesus recognized “this woman was going through one of the most harrowing experiences conceivable, exposed to the gaze of a leering and scornful crowd, her good name torn away, her self-respect crushed.”<sup>25</sup> Rauschenbusch concludes by declaring the situation “brought out the courtesy of Jesus, his respect for human personality even in its shame.”<sup>26</sup> Jesus did not condemn the woman; instead he told her to leave her sin (Jn 8:11). It is this same respect for humanity that caused Jesus to cleanse the man with leprosy (Mt 8:1-4) according to Rauschenbusch. As an outcast of society, the leper bore the shame of announcing his infirmity according to the Levitical code.<sup>27</sup> However, Jesus’s “spontaneous tenderness which he put into his contact with the sick was an

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>27</sup> Richard Foster, *Studies in the Life of Christ* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 1995), 987.

expression of his sense of the sacredness of life.”<sup>28</sup> Jesus willingly touched the man, concretely demonstrating his belief that God cared more for mercy than sacrifice (Mt 9:13).

Jesus’s high regard for humanity is the paradigm for Christians’ understanding concerning the value of life. Whether it was the story of the woman caught in adultery or the men with leprosy,

[p]hysical deformity and moral guilt could not obscure the divine worth of human life to [Jesus]. To cause any soul to stumble and go down, or to express contempt for any human being, was to him a horrible guilt. This regard for human life was based on the same social instinct which every normal man possesses. But with Jesus it was so strong that it determined all his viewpoints and activities.... The respect of Jesus for every concrete person whom he met was due to his religious insight into human life and destiny.<sup>29</sup>

Rauschenbusch contends that Jesus’s valuation of human life was not unique to him because of his divine nature. Every person has within himself the potential to value others. However, Christians have a special responsibility to identify the worth of individuals, even the most socially marginalized, as Jesus did. This belief leads Rauschenbusch to conclude his book with this challenge:

[t]hink what it would signify to a local community if all sincere Christian people in it should interpret their obligation in the social terms which we have been using; if they should seek not only their own salvation, but the reign of God in their own town; if they should cultivate the habit of seeing a divine sacredness in every personality, should assist in creating the economic foundations for fraternal solidarity, and if, as Christians, they should champion the weak in their own community.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Rauschenbusch, *Social Principles of Jesus*, 3.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 12-13.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 236-237.

Rauschenbusch can serve as a spokesperson for Evangelicals and their valuation of personhood based on the life of Jesus. His use of the New Testament, and particularly the acts and teachings of Jesus offer a solid biblical rationale for affirming the worth of all individuals. People are valued because Jesus values them. Valuing the individual conforms to the model of Jesus, which is an act of obedient devotion to God that is expressed in loving the other as a neighbor.

### Neighbor Love and Society

The ethic of neighbor love has also affected how Christians have viewed society. Jesus, Paul, and Peter accept that Christians are members of society and that believers have responsibilities to their political communities.<sup>31</sup> With the biblical instruction to obey the ruling authorities so long as doing so does not cause an individual to disobey God, Christians have practiced neighbor love toward society in various ways. One means has been by attending to the well-being of the whole community. This is referred to as the common good.

The idea of the common good is neither new nor limited to the Christian religion. Plato implies the importance of the common good in *The Republic*, when he says, “in founding the city we are not looking to the exceptional happiness of any one group among us but, as far as possible, that of the city as a whole.”<sup>32</sup> Aristotle makes a similar allusion to the common good when he says that the state

legislates what one ought to do and what to abstain from, its end would encompass those of the others, with the result that this would be the human good. For even if this is the same thing for an individual and a city,

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<sup>31</sup> Minimally, the Christian is responsible for paying taxes and respecting those authorities who govern (Mk 12:13-17; Rom 13:1-7; 1 Pt 2:13-17).

<sup>32</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, 2nd ed., trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 420b.



to secure and preserve the good of the city appears to be something greater and more complete: the good of the individual by himself is certainly desirable enough, but that of a nation and of cities is nobler and more divine.<sup>33</sup>

Centuries later, John Stuart Mill posits that his utilitarian principle is based on the idea of the common good. He defines utility as “not the agent’s own greatest happiness, but the greatest amount of happiness altogether.”<sup>34</sup> He clarifies that this principle is to be “to the greatest extent possible, secured to all mankind; and not to them only, but, so far as the nature of things admits, to the whole sentient creation.”<sup>35</sup> The common good still finds voice in political life today. In his 2009 inaugural address, Barack Obama tied the success of the American economy to “the reach of our prosperity, on the ability to extend opportunity to every willing heart—not out of charity, but because it is the surest route to our common good.”<sup>36</sup>

The common good has a long history within the art of state craft, but it also has a tradition within Christianity. A notion of the common good is found among the first believers in Jerusalem: “no one claimed private ownership of any possessions, but everything they owned was held in common” (Acts 4:32 NRSV). One explanation for their sharing is that they deemed it an expression of neighbor love. The apostles and those who had heard Jesus would have remembered his teachings and various parables promoting care for the needy. This is evident in the epistles which encourage believers to

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<sup>33</sup> Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 1094b, 5-11.

<sup>34</sup> Mill, *Utilitarianism*, 11.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>36</sup> Barack Obama, “President Barack Obama’s Inaugural Address,” The White House Blog, January 20, 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/inaugural-address> (accessed July 7, 2013).

demonstrate love by providing for the needs of others.<sup>37</sup> They also would have recalled the importance Jesus placed on loving one another. It is possible that the earliest Christians identified care for the well-being of others—the common good—as an expression of neighbor love.

Thomas Aquinas offers the first systematic discussion of the common good in Christian theology. The thirteenth century monk begins from the natural law, which he defines as

[the rational creature's] share of the Eternal Reason, whereby it has a natural inclination to its proper act and end: and this participation of the eternal law in the rational creature is called the natural law... Thus implying that the light of natural reason, whereby we discern what is good and what is evil, which is the function of the natural law, is nothing else than an imprint on us of the Divine light. It is therefore evident that the natural law is nothing else than the rational creature's participation of the eternal law.<sup>38</sup>

For Thomas, the natural law guides how the universe functions; it is the revelation through nature of how God has organized creation. This God-ordained ordering is law, since laws are given to make those subject to them good.<sup>39</sup> Therefore, the purpose of the natural law is to make creation good in accordance with how God has structured it.

The category of “good” is crucial for understanding what Thomas means when discussing the common good.

The essence of goodness consists in this, that it is in some way desirable... Now it is clear that a thing is desirable only in so far as it is perfect; for all desire their own perfection. But everything is perfect so far as it is actual.

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<sup>37</sup> Phil 4:16; Jas 2:8; 1 Jn 3:17.

<sup>38</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologica of St. Thomas Aquinas [ST]*, trans. Fathers of the English Dominican Province (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1922), I-II, q. 91, a. 2.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., I-II, q. 92, a. 1.

Hence it is clear that goodness and being are the same really.<sup>40</sup>

All things seek their own existence; this is their “proper act and end” which is found in God (Acts 17:28). However, humanity has two additional inclinations toward good as a rational creature: “to know the truth about God, and to live in society.”<sup>41</sup> It is this inclination to live in society that expands the personal good of self-preservation into a common good for the community.<sup>42</sup> According to Susanne DeCrane, a “person is challenged through the sociality of her nature not only to take account of the good of the other and of the community as equal to her own, but in some instances to choose to forgo a good for herself in order to promote the common good.”<sup>43</sup> The common good allows life to flourish and strive toward its appropriate *telos* (making it “good”) across the entirety of the species (making it “common”).

Understanding the common good as humanity’s obligation to one another permeates Thomas’s writings. In topics ranging from war to economics to sexuality, he continually emphasizes that human actions should aim toward the common good of humanity. While he is clear what these acts should look like, he admits that the contingencies of a situation will alter behaviors.<sup>44</sup> As Lisa Cahill observes, “Aquinas outlines principles of the natural law which reflect basic spheres of human moral experience and social living; then cautions that more particular determinations of right

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., I-I, q. 5, a. 1.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., I-II, q. 94, a. 2

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., II-II, q. 26, z. 4.

<sup>43</sup> Susanne DeCrane, *Aquinas, Feminism, and the Common Good* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2004), 67.

<sup>44</sup> Aquinas, *ST*, I-II, q. 7, a. 2.

and wrong will be less certain...”<sup>45</sup> Whether Thomas is addressing general principles or particular circumstances, he assumes Christians’ active engagement with society, and that they are doing their part to foster the common good.

While Thomas’s *Summa* is a theological treatise, his notion of the common good expresses vestiges of the practical theology manuals common to his religious order at that time. As a Dominican, he was both trained in and taught moral theology, according to Leonard Boyle. “In all the conventual schools, practical theology...was the order of the day, and this was the principal function of any conventual Lector, St. Thomas not excluded.”<sup>46</sup> Aquinas may have tried to “expand [his] students’ theological education and to break out of the narrow tradition of practical theology,”<sup>47</sup> but much of his *Summa* is dedicated to discerning how to live virtuously. This lifestyle includes practicing both the moral virtues (prudence, justice, fortitude, and temperance), and the theological virtues (faith, hope, and love). Of these seven, Aquinas names charity “the mother of the other virtues;”<sup>48</sup> first to God and then to neighbor.<sup>49</sup> For Thomas, Christian love is the reason for and the guide of the common good.

Christians continue to aim at the common good as a means of expressing love for their neighbors. Through great acts of philanthropy, voluntary self-sacrifice, and social activism, believers in this faith tradition have endeavored to create opportunities and

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<sup>45</sup> Lisa Sowle Cahill, *Sex Gender & Christian Ethics*, New Studies in Christian Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 50.

<sup>46</sup> Leonard Boyle, “The Settings of the *Summa Theologiae* of S. Thomas—Revisited,” in *The Ethics of Aquinas*, ed. Stephen Pope (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2002), 3.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>48</sup> Aquinas, *ST*, II-II, q. 23, a.8.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, II-II, q. 27, a. 8.

organizations that help others participate more fully in life. It is this commitment to the common good through a neighbor love ethic that has moved Christians to discuss issues of economic justice. Both John Cobb, Jr. and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) have examined the relationship of monetary policies to the common good. They have spoken out against the economic conditions occurring in the world and recommend different approaches for correcting the imbalance they see in the market system. However, they both agree that the current practices do little to engender neighbor love toward those suffering from economic inequalities.

The Bishops addressed the issue of the economic injustice in their 1984 pastoral letter *Economic Justice for All*. The USCCB's letter not only continues the Catholic Church's call for fair wages, but the Bishops go further and seek full employment for those who want to work. Their economic ideal attenuates the profit motif and develops a model where fiscal policy and practice involve everyone, with a special emphasis on the poor. The Bishops argue that whatever the new, imaginative vision might look like, all "decisions must be judged in light of what they do *for* the poor, what they do *to* the poor and what they enable the poor to do *for themselves*."<sup>50</sup> The Bishops justify this by appealing to the ethic of neighbor love that reveals itself in the practice of the common good.

The obligation to evaluate social and economic activity from the viewpoint of the poor and the powerless arises from the radical command to love one's neighbor as one's self.... The prime purpose of this special commitment to the poor is to enable them to become active participants in the life of society. It is to enable *all* persons to share in and contribute to

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<sup>50</sup> USCCB, *Economic Justice for All* (EJA) (Washington, DC, USCCB Publishing, 1986), 1.24, 12. Emphasis is in the original text.

the common good.<sup>51</sup>

Throughout their letter, the USCCB repeatedly proclaims people's right to fair remuneration and revenue. This view stems from their conviction that neighbor love is demonstrable by having economic justice for everyone in society.<sup>52</sup>

Like the Catholic Bishops, John Cobb, Jr. has also written on pursuing the common good in economics as a means of loving one's neighbor. While Cobb omits any direct reference to neighbor love, the idea pervades the theologian's book, *For the Common Good*. In it, Cobb and economist Herman Daly explore the capitalist economic structure in order to reshape it within a Christian neighbor love framework that makes the economic system more life-sustaining than profit-driven. They write extensively about the need for a paradigm shift that recognizes *Homo economicus* (economic humanity) not simply as an economic being living in isolation, apart from both other people and the environment, but as members of a community.<sup>53</sup> Daly's and Cobb's idea of community entails people of differing ethnic, religious, and socio-economic backgrounds living together and promoting each other's political and financial well-being. This community also extends across time: "To serve God cannot call for sacrifice of future lives for the sake of satisfying the extravagant appetites of the present. Believers in God know that the community to which they belong extends through time. One cannot discount a future that will be immediate to God."<sup>54</sup>

John Cobb and the US Bishops call for the retooling of the capitalist economic

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 3.87-88, 45-46.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., "A Pastoral Message," 6, vii.

<sup>53</sup> Herman Daly and John Cobb, Jr., *For the Common Good* (Boston: Beacon, 1989), 7.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 398.

structure in order to better provide for the common good. While they each draw upon their own Christian traditions to do this, the Bishops and Cobb have similarities. They both ground their economic ideas in Christian love. The Bishops explicitly state neighbor love as their motivation while Cobb alludes to it. Both are concerned for the poor and vulnerable (whether human or planetary) and espouse financial practices that promote the flourishing of life. Finally, Cobb and the Bishops identify life as being in community among neighbors. It is this love for one's neighbor that animates their pursuit of the common good.

### Neighbor Love and the Environment

Christians have shown a growing interest in ecological issues in recent years. However, this has been tempered as many people, Evangelical Christians among them, draw clear demarcations between humanity and the rest of planetary life. There is a philosophical basis for this distinction,<sup>55</sup> but there is also a scriptural justification for differentiating between human and non-human life. Christians understand humanity as created in the image of God, leading to the view that humankind holds a unique position within creation. This narrative, combined with a regenerative eschatology, has led many to elevate human concerns over the rest of the biosphere. However, there is a biblical basis for identifying creation care as a Christian responsibility. Drawing on the Bible, the USCCB and James Nash highlight the relationship of God to creation, and support my claim that a neighbor love ethic offers a scriptural rationale for Christians to engage in ecological stewardship.

The argument for a scriptural justification for ecological indifference begins with

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<sup>55</sup> For a brief account of how Kantian philosophy has contributed to separating humanity from other planetary life, see Paul Santmire, *The Travail of Nature* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1985) 133-137.

the creation story in Genesis 1. For five days the Creator forms and fills this new creation with sun and stars, trees and oceans, all the while building to the anthropocentric climax of the story. On the sixth day, God declares, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground” (Gn 1:26). The *magnum opus* of creation comes into existence: God makes humankind. Based on this record of events, the Bible teaches that humanity holds a unique place in creation. *Homo sapiens* are declared ruler over creation. The chapter reiterates humanity’s authority over the rest of creation two verses later: “God blessed them and said to them, ‘Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground’” (Gn 1:28). Lynn White argues that this biblical mandate has provided Christianity with a confirmation of mankind’s dominance over creation. “Man shares, in great measure, God’s transcendence of nature. Christianity...not only established a dualism of man and nature but also insists that it is God’s will that man exploit nature for his proper ends.”<sup>56</sup>

Genesis 1 has been used to justify nature’s subjection to humanity’s purposes, but Christianity’s emphasis on a regenerative eschatology has also impacted the believer’s stance on creation care. A core teaching of the New Testament concerns ideas of an afterlife and the return of Christ with a promised “new heaven and a new earth” (Rv 21:1), since “the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time” (Rom 8:22). If God intends to replace this earth with a new one, then one interpretive consequence becomes neglect of the planet, since the Bible regards it as

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<sup>56</sup> White, “Historical Roots,” 1205.



disposable—it is destined to perish. While not all Christians who hold a regenerative eschatological position remain indifferent to planetary care, this theology has tended to create an attitude of disregard for nature and inaction towards curbing environmental degradation. For Evangelicals in particular, the ecological conditions of earth may be lamentable, but their theological reading of scripture insists, “This world is not my home, I’m just a-passin’ through.”<sup>57</sup>

Despite its use of scripture, a regenerative eschatology filtered through Genesis 1 offers a limited reading of the Bible with regard to its view of creation. This method neglects other biblical passages that identify creation as having a relationship with the Divine, apart from humanity. Job 38-41 declares the universe belongs to God, and it is the Creator that creation obeys. The Psalms identify the natural world as revealing God’s glory, and Jesus declares that God is concerned with the birds of the air and grass of the field (Mt. 6:26-30). Naming humankind as rulers of the planet without qualification is inappropriate according to scripture. Creation belongs to God, and such a view should change humanity’s understanding of its relationship to the environment.

One alternative perception is that humans are stewards of creation, a position the USCCB has taken in their document *Renewing the Earth*. While the creation story in Genesis 1 authorizes humankind to “rule over” and “subdue” the earth, the USCCB draws heavily from Genesis 2. In this account, “the LORD God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it” (Gn 2:15). Adam is the caretaker of creation whose responsibilities include naming the animals of the land and air. The Bishops’ use of Genesis 2 allows them to reframe the issue of creation care with God,

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<sup>57</sup> Mary Reeves and Albert E. Brumley, “This World Is Not My Home,” Jim Reeves (artist), RCA Victor Europe, 1995.

rather than humanity, at the center of the story. This change in emphasis prompts the Bishops to see nature's diversity as a manifestation of its Creator's glory, and humanity's denigration of the planet as a violation of God, whose reflection infuses creation.<sup>58</sup>

The Bishops could also have invoked Thomas Aquinas, who expounded on how the universe functions writ large as an expression of Divine goodness. Because God's goodness is so great, no single species can contain the magnificence and beneficence of the Divine.

For He brought things into being in order that His goodness might be communicated to creatures, and be represented by them; and because His goodness could not be adequately represented by one creature alone, He produced many and diverse creatures, that what was wanting to one in the representation of the divine goodness might be supplied by another. For goodness, which in God is simple and uniform, in creatures is manifold and divided and hence the whole universe together participates [in] the divine goodness more perfectly, and represents it better than any single creature whatever.<sup>59</sup>

This belief leads Aquinas to confirm the value of all life; creation's existence and flourishing is a participation in God. From this perspective, the biosphere has theological significance as a representation of God's goodness.

Although Catholic Bishops are aware of this Thomistic approach and give it a veiled acknowledgement, they draw upon the Apostle Paul to bolster their position. The Bishops reference Paul's theology of creation found in the book of Acts. While visiting Athens, Paul shares the Gospel with the men in the Areopagus. He posits that humanity is able to recognize God through the natural world (Acts 17:26-27). Paul maintains this same view when he writes to the Church in Rome: "For since the creation of the world

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<sup>58</sup> USCCB, *Renewing the Earth* (Washington, DC, USCCB Publishing, 1991), III B, 7.

<sup>59</sup> Aquinas, *ST*, I-I, q. 47, a. 1.

God's invisible qualities—his eternal power and divine nature—have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made..." (Rom. 1:20). Creation is a revelation of God. The Bishops believe that as Christians realign to this biblically oriented view of creation, people within the faith tradition will be challenged to "extend our love...to the flourishing of all earth's creatures."<sup>60</sup>

While the USCCB presents a pastoral overview concerning creation care and ecological stewardship, James Nash specifically explores the idea of loving nature as an aspect of Christian love. In his book *Loving Nature*, Nash charges that the New Testament has been read in limited and limiting ways. "For most theologians—Augustine to Luther, Aquinas to Barth, and the bulk of others in between and before and after—the theological focus has been on sin and salvation, the fall and redemption, the divine-human relationship over against the biophysical world as a whole."<sup>61</sup> Believing that Christianity has offered little theology or praxis to the care of creation, Nash reinterprets Christian doctrines with the intention of integrating nature into them. He claims that, "if ecological ethics is given its due, significant redefinitions of moral responsibilities and relationships will be necessary in all branches of Christian ethics."<sup>62</sup> It is this conviction that guides Nash's examination of the ecological situation within a Gospel context.

Nash adopts the language of love as he develops his Christian ecological ethic. He posits that love is the basis for all Christian theology and ethics, prompting him, like the USCCB, to expand the idea of neighbor and who constitutes one's neighbor.

Reasonably extended, our neighbors who are to be loved are all God's

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<sup>60</sup> USCCB, *Renewing the Earth*, IV, C, 11.

<sup>61</sup> James Nash, *Loving Nature* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 1991), 72.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

beloved creatures. The 'love of nature' is simply the 'love of neighbor' universalized in recognition of our common origins, mutual dependencies, and shared destiny with the whole creation of the God who is all-embracing love.<sup>63</sup>

Nash notes that, throughout the Gospels, Jesus's admonitions to love one's neighbor encourage various practices, including acts of beneficence, other-esteem, justice, and communion. If Christians are going to extend neighbor love to the natural world, they must find ways to enact these forms of love toward nature.

According to Nash, the deepest means of fostering love for the natural world is by seeing it in terms of communion. Communion describes the ultimate relational expression of love because it is "reconciliation, harmony, koinonia, shalom."<sup>64</sup> This is Christian love, and it is the love Nash proposes that Christians owe nature. He admits that humanity is unable to fully love like this; however, "this vision of love as communion is by no means irrelevant to history, human and natural... Though we cannot experience the full harmony of the New Creation, we can approximate it to the fullest extent that the moral ambiguity of this creation makes possible."<sup>65</sup> Christians should not neglect this world because it is fallen and destined for destruction (2 Pt 3:11-13), just as they do not forgo loving other humans because their love is imperfect. On the contrary, caring for the temporal earth is an act of Christian love that earnestly expresses anticipation for the eschatological new earth.

While the ecological situation continues to change, Christianity has within itself the resources necessary to address this issue. It has historically given priority to humanity

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 159.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 160.

as the ruler and dominator of the planet, and coupled this view with a regenerative eschatology. These have tended to permit environmental negligence. However, Christians are recognizing the dire impacts people's lifestyles are having upon the planet. This has led theologians to re-examine scripture and redefine humanity's relationship to the natural world. Such an approach allows God—rather than mankind—to be the focal point of the creation story while expanding notions of who the recipients of neighbor love are. Creation care serves as an expression of the dual love commands: to love God by respecting his revelation, and to love neighbor, which extends to the environment.

### Christian Neighbor Love

This chapter has explored a decidedly Evangelical, biblically-based understanding of Christian neighbor love in relationship to personhood, society, and the environment. Walter Rauschenbusch offers a scripturally compelling rationale for giving value to all human life based on the example of Christ. Jesus identified the worth of the individual, including the marginalized, and commanded his disciples to do the same through the act of love. Love of one's neighbor carries over into attitudes and behaviors that seek the common good for society. John Cobb, Jr., and the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops use this language of the common good to express what Christian neighbor love will look like when extended to a community. James Nash enlarges the notion of neighbor even further, arguing that neighbor ought to include the planet, thereby obligating the Christian to find ways to love the environment.

Neighbor love stands as a foundational Christian ethic, particularly for Evangelicals. The principle is grounded in scripture and reaffirmed throughout the New Testament. It also describes the attitude and behaviors expressed by Jesus in the Gospels.

Christ not only taught his disciples to love their neighbors but demonstrated this love to his neighbors. Living two millennia after Jesus, Christians today must engage in the process of analogy-making in order to obey his commandment to love one's neighbor. Making the analogical leap from biblical teaching to present practice requires the believer to exercise her reason. Using reason, the Christian can determine the best means of enacting the neighbor love ethic as commanded in the New Testament.

### **The Comparison of the Ethics of Consumerism and Christianity**

It is now possible to juxtapose the ethics of consumerism and Christianity. Comparing and contrasting neighbor love with the ethic of self-defined happiness through consuming reveals the fundamental difference between Christianity and consumerism, namely that the ethic of consumerism is antithetical to Christianity's neighbor love. To further illustrate this contradistinction, I create three pairings of Smart's dimensions (doctrinal and narrative, social and ritual, and experiential and emotional) and apply the Christian and consumerist expressions of each pairing to personhood, society, or the environment. Despite the similar ways these two religions express several of the dimensions, this method highlights how their ethics diverge.

#### **Christianity and Consumerism: Personal Ethics**

Both consumerism and Christianity provide a doctrine and narrative that explain what personhood means. The two religions offer strong notions of personhood, and they support the idea that individual convictions and freedom are constitutive of the person. Consumerism and Christianity advance the worth of human beings in their own ways, but they identify personhood as originating from two distinct criteria: one's ability to consume or being loved by God, respectively. This leads consumerism and Christianity to

use similar motifs in their stories to support their doctrines, but they motivate their disciples to behave in ways appropriate to each religion.

The narrative of consumerism teaches individuals that life is unsatisfying in its present state. Interest rates on savings accounts are not good enough. People's hair types, hair color, or lack of hair are all reasons to be embarrassed. The repetitive chores of day-to-day living are obstacles to personal satisfaction. However, consumerism offers hope for happiness. Individuals can obtain the happy life they want through the actions of shopping and buying. The precise character of this felicity is variable since it is self-defined, but a foundational tenet of consumerism is that the grass is greener on the other side. This is a message that is constantly repeated to consumers within a narrative of despair and hope.

The stories told through the cycle of despair and hope convey the doctrine of consumerism: personhood is the ability to freely express one's will and convictions though deciding what material goods will bring about personal happiness. The narrative establishes and reinforces the idea that the individual is lacking in some way. This occurs either by directly stating the deficiency or implying that there is one. The story concludes by informing the consumer that the key to her personhood is found in consumable products. Michelle Gonzalez describes the narrative this way: "we are constantly barraged with images and advertisements that attempt to convince us of the inadequacies in our lives that can be solved with one outfit, one electronic gadget. Material goods are presented as the solution to all of our problems..."<sup>66</sup> Through one's consumption, the individual finds liberation from a life of melancholy and mediocrity.

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<sup>66</sup> Michelle Gonzalez, *Shopping*, Compass Series (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2010), 12.

However, pursuing release from these qualities through consumption raises a series of questions. How much does one need to consume in order to attain personhood and/or happiness? Is it necessary to continually consume in order to retain those traits? What is the status of personhood or happiness for those unable to consume the appropriate amounts? While spokespersons within the social dimension promulgate this message and their stories teach the importance of consuming as a way to express personhood, they remain silent on these questions.<sup>67</sup> One reason for this may be that the status of person is based on consumption. Those who are unable to afford the time or financial resources to shop stand on the margins of consumer society. Andrew Heinze holds this theory. He posits that Jewish immigrants arriving in America at the turn of the twentieth century equated consumption with American society.<sup>68</sup> Heinze notes the *Yiddishes Tageblatt*, a Jewish newspaper of the time, “suggested that Jews were becoming more definitely American by raising their material standards.”<sup>69</sup> A century later, people still promulgate the doctrine that being part of society is dependent upon one’s consumptive practices.

Within Christianity, priests, ministers, elders, and others within the social dimension tell a different story regarding personhood. These figures remind their congregants each week of human brokenness due to sin. Instead of a self-liberation through consuming, the Christian narrative tells of God’s forgiveness and love. Whether it is because humanity is the *imago Dei* or because of the example of Jesus, all people

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<sup>67</sup> While those involved in marketing evade these questions, economists do address these topics. See chapter one for an overview.

<sup>68</sup> Andrew Heinze, “From Scarcity to Abundance: The Immigrant as Consumer,” in Glickman, *Consumer Society*, 190.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.



have worth. The New Testament stories of Jesus and his followers demonstrating this value of life has led some like Mother Teresa and Francis of Assisi to give up their possessions to serve alongside the disenfranchised. Within Christianity, those who perform such actions on account of their faith add to the narrative.

These stories encourage attitudes and behaviors that coincide with the Christian doctrine that all people have value as persons. Contrary to consumerism, which is silent with regard to the status of those unable to consume adequately, the Bible explicitly gives value to the lives of the poor and oppressed (Lk 4:18). They are the ones who will inherit the kingdom of God (Lk 6:20). Human worth is not something an individual must afford; it is God-given. “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him. This is love: not that we loved God, but that he loves us and sent his Son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins” (1 Jn 4:9-10). For Christians, God’s love is the reason humanity has intrinsic worth.

The narratives and doctrine of consumerism and Christianity are similar. They both offer stories that describe humanity’s situation: individuals are blemished creatures, yet the imperfect individual can find salvation. Consumerism teaches that the ordinary lives people lead are physically and emotionally dissatisfying, but a life of consumption delivers them from this situation. The individual can liberate herself from the mundane into a life of happiness, and in this way she shows the value of her personhood. Christianity also offers redemption, although it proposes deliverance from the realm of sin, guilt, and separation. This narrative conveys that an individual’s worth results from God’s love. These narratives express the doctrine of personal value that both Christianity

and consumerism hold. In both religions, ideas of personhood are fundamental tenets, even though they differ on how people obtain their worth.

### Christianity and Consumerism: Social Ethics

Consumerism and Christianity emphasize similar religious dimensions in relationship to society, particularly regarding the ritual and social dimensions. In both belief systems, ritual is used as a way of demonstrating commitment to the religion and to its other followers. When members participate in the ceremonies of the religion, that involvement shapes the way they view society and conversely how society views them. Along with this, one's social role within the religion influences how society and the religion perceive the individual. If the religion and society are amicable toward one another, then a person's increased commitment to the religion results in greater honor by those within and those outside the believing community. This is a deference Christians have historically received in America and one in which consumers are now gaining. In both cases, individuals' position within the religion and participation in the rituals identify them as members.

Within the Christian community, the celebration of the Eucharist is a ritual that identifies participants as members.<sup>70</sup> As John Stott states, "nearly every branch of the Christian church agrees that the Lord's Supper or Holy Communion is the central service, instituted by Christ and commemorating his death in fellowship with one another."<sup>71</sup> Eating the bread and drinking from the cup are signs that those partaking have aligned themselves within the community of the universal Christian Church. However, the

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<sup>70</sup> While Christian baptism also confers membership, I have chosen Communion because believers are expected to partake in the Eucharist on a regular basis.

<sup>71</sup> John Stott, *Basic Christianity* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1971), 140.

acknowledgement of one's membership with the larger Christian community is a mutual event. While anyone can attend and to degrees participate in a church service, only those who are recognized as devotees to Christ may share in this specific ritual.

Within the Church, there are three key social roles that all congregations acknowledge. These are priest/pastor, missionary, and laity. Pastors represent the leadership of a congregation. Their responsibility includes teaching, defining, guiding, and modeling the beliefs of the church. Missionaries are the evangelists who share the message of Christianity, proselytizing those who are not yet part of the faith. The laity are the congregants who contribute time, effort, and/or finances to carry out the work of the priest and missionary. While the distinctions between these roles are more and less fixed according to the denomination, each of these groups pursues, in its own way, a Christian neighbor love ethic toward society, as was addressed in chapter four.

At one level, the ritual of shopping in consumerism serves similarly to the Christian ritual of the Eucharist. Both identify a person as a member of the community and reveal that membership to others. Zygmunt Bauman describes consumerism as a “social arrangement...which sets the ‘society of consumers’ in motion and keeps it on course as a specific form of human togetherness, while by the same token setting specific parameters for effective individual life strategies and otherwise manipulating the probabilities of individual choices and conduct.”<sup>72</sup> The phrase “keeps it on course” denotes the constant pressure that consumerism must exert on society if it is to remain in place. Although Bauman does not address the form this pressure might take, Victor Lebow does. “Our enormously productive economy demands that we make consumption

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<sup>72</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Consuming Life* (Malden, MA: Polity, 2007), 28.

our way of life, that we convert the buying and use of goods into rituals, that we seek our spiritual satisfactions, our ego satisfactions, in consumption.”<sup>73</sup> Lebow posits that shopping is a manifestation of that force which nurtures human togetherness and shapes societal life. This is the message the social leadership of consumerism proclaims: consuming identifies people within a community.

Shopping as ritual is an idea those within the social dimension of consumerism encourage. The laity (shoppers), missionaries (advertisers), and priests/pastors (economists and corporations) focus their energies on nurturing a desire for continual want. These groups attempt to transform the mundane practice of buying goods into a communal partaking in the feast of consumption. In fact, Daniel Miller identifies shopping as “primarily an act of love.... That is to say, shopping does not merely reflect love, but is a major form in which this love is manifested and reproduced.”<sup>74</sup> Yet the ritual of shopping does not extend this love toward society as a whole. Consumption for happiness remains a largely privatizing activity.

Christianity and consumerism use ritual to indicate membership, but their adherents develop different stances toward society. This results from their distinctive ethics. Consumerism emphasizes personal happiness through consuming, which presumes a focus on the self over others. While friendships and social ties still develop, they do not extend to the general public. Alan Aldridge observes that “the corrosion of community by individualism and consumerism is a recurrent theme in Western social

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<sup>73</sup> Victor Lebow, “Price Competition in 1955,” *Journal of Retailing* 31, no.1 (Spring 1955), 7.

<sup>74</sup> Daniel Miller, *A Theory of Shopping*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), 18.

thought, and in empirical studies of local communities.”<sup>75</sup> Although consumerism contributes to an increase in the standards of living for many within society, it does not offer a relational community. Christianity, on the other hand, heightens thoughts of one’s neighbors to the point of loving them as one’s self. The religion teaches the value of all life based on its scripture, and encourages its followers to renounce personal luxuries to assist others.

### Christianity and Consumerism: Environmental Ethics

In relation to the environment, both consumerism and Christianity have maintained relatively anthropocentric views. Particularly within the material and experiential dimensions, humanity’s purpose for the physical world supersedes the planet’s other reasons for existence. The value of the natural world comes from what humanity can gain from it materially or how it affects people emotionally. This approach to the environment leads a large number of consumers and Christians to value the natural world solely on its service to humanity.

Consumerism and Christianity express their material dimensions through concrete structures built by human ingenuity that frequently imitate the natural world. Contractors clear acres of fields and woods, destroying the vegetation and scattering the wildlife. Architects make huge edifices, the interior of which often mimics the grandeur of the nature just eradicated. Churches have pools and fountains of water to use in rituals, design open-spaced sanctuaries that extend to great heights, and incorporate images of the natural world in their stained-glass windows and murals. These are aids that help churchgoers in their worship of God. Malls and shopping centers also contain elements of

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<sup>75</sup> Alan Aldridge, *Consumption* (Cambridge: Polity, 2003), 68.

the natural world within them. Fountains, trees, and even animals on display all contribute to the consumer's experience of awe as they shop. While Christianity and consumerism create spaces to congregate, they also recognize that nature enriches humanity's experiences.

These construction projects have historically had an adverse impact upon the environment; however, architects of these great works have begun to show more responsible attitudes toward the planet in their usage of the material dimension. Developers are designing open-air malls that use fewer resources in America's more temperate regions, and consumers are embracing them.<sup>76</sup> LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) certified shopping centers are also being built across the United States in an effort to maintain greater environmental consciousness. Christianity has recognized the Divine imprint on the natural world by utilizing caves, grottos, and other natural spaces as places of worship. These can function as reminders to the Church that God is an artisan who created the material world and that any practice which would "threaten to extinguish species is not only bad ecologically, but idolatrous theologically."<sup>77</sup> For different reasons, consumerism and Christianity are rethinking how their material dimensions impact planetary life.

Some Christians have recognized the danger environmental degradation presents to their experience of the Divine. While the physical world mediates human life, creation is a means of emotionally experiencing the Creator. Nature is the work of God, and

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<sup>76</sup> Justine Griffin, "Open-air malls a hit with South Florida Shoppers," *South Florida Sun Sentinel*, February 28, 2012, [http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/2012-02-28/business/fl-outdoor-malls-growth-20120228\\_1\\_open-air-centers-indoor-malls-open-air-malls](http://articles.sun-sentinel.com/2012-02-28/business/fl-outdoor-malls-growth-20120228_1_open-air-centers-indoor-malls-open-air-malls) (accessed July 7, 2013).

<sup>77</sup> William French, "Ecological Dangers and Christian Response," *New Theology Review* 4, no. 2 (1991): 37.

gazing on ecological biodiversity is a means of observing one's Maker. Like the apostle Paul and Thomas Aquinas, Christians are rediscovering a theology of creation which recognizes that "in all creatures there is found the trace of the Trinity."<sup>78</sup> People are amazed at what a seed can produce and stand in awe of the aurora borealis. Nature points to God. Although Christians have not been as environmentally conscious as the world may need, this does not dismiss the emotional experiences Christians have derived from observing—not harnessing—creation.

Those whose ultimate concern is sought in consumption also maintain an emotional connection to the natural world. While consumers generally give little attention to the environment in its natural setting, components of nature are used to emotionally connect people within consumerism. Stores build waterfalls and plant shrubbery to heighten shoppers' association between their products and the environment. Businesses create nature-themed displays to help customers feel like they are really in the wilds while eating. This allows consumers to create an emotional connection to an idealized imagery of nature or recapture some previous experience with it. As with Christians, the experiential dimension involving the environment fosters feelings of concern for nature.

The experiential and material dimensions of consumerism and Christianity relate to the environment in similar ways. While both religions are increasing their awareness of the ecological situation, they maintain a stance of humanity's mastery over nature. The physical world is used within these two religions' material dimension to recreate nature as mankind sees appropriate. Such manipulation helps assure that individuals are safe and that their interactions with nature are experientially inspirational. The problem with this

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<sup>78</sup> Aquinas, *ST*, I-I, q. 45, a. 7.

anthropocentric view toward the environment is that nature's worth depends on its ability to produce material goods or emotional experiences. This subjects the environment to various utilitarian calculations based on human standards rather than some outside criterion.

### The Ethical Approaches of Consumerism and Christianity

While there are varying degrees of correlation between the religious dimensions of consumerism and Christianity, their ethical visions are antithetical to one another. The Christian injunction to love one's neighbor leads to very different behaviors and attitudes than the pursuit of self-defined happiness through consuming. These distinct moral approaches to personhood, society, and the environment reflect the differences in the doctrines of consumerism and Christianity that their narratives did not. It is based on the ethic of Christianity that some like John Kavanaugh, Rodney Clapp, and John Cobb have critiqued consumerism. They recognize that consumerism has a radically different guiding principle that is incompatible with Christian teaching.

Since the ethical dimensions of Christianity and consumerism are in conflict, Christians must examine the effects of this globally expanding world religion. They need to reflect on how their own faith is influenced by consumerism and critically examine the patterns of and reasons for their own consumption. Christians have to think through how to engage others who accept the alternative reality claims of consumerism. This dissertation concludes, then, by identifying the key implications of this study and how these impact those who seek to practice Christian neighbor love.



## CONCLUSION

Consumerism is a multifaceted concept that guides human behaviors, motivations, and systems toward ever-increasing consumption. It describes both the attitudes and forces that encourage individuals to buy goods in an effort to give value and meaning to life. The term consumerism also entails the social structures that promote the importance of continual consumption for human flourishing. In addition, consumerism is a religion whose ethical dimension is antithetical to Christian neighbor love.

An emphasis on consumption occurs throughout virtually all aspects of American life. This study has focused on the role of consumerism within the economic, socio-psychological, and religious spheres. From Adam Smith to Karl Marx to Milton Friedman, no one denies the importance of consumption for economic growth. In the same way, Thorstein Veblen and others clarify how human consumption affects an individual's social standing and ability to retain associations. While much has been written on the place of consumerism within economic and social life, theologians have only recently begun to explore consumerism in relationship to religion. Prior to this study, some have gone so far as to name consumerism a religion, yet they have not substantiated their claim.

Religion has been defined in two ways. The first approach describes religion as the worshipping of one or more deities. These spiritual beings receive people's veneration and devotion and are their gods. Paul Tillich extends the concept of god to

include anything that concerns a person completely and wholly. God is the word for an ultimate concern. For some people, their primary desire is to consume, thereby making the act of consumption their god. While this locates consumerism within a definition of religion, it is incomplete. The idea that religion is merely one's ultimate concern ignores the second way people understand the term religion.

To have a complete understanding of religion, its description must also include the structures people associate with religions. Religion entails the notion of an organized belief system that maintains formalized tenets, hierarchies, and practices. For this study, Ninian Smart's delineational approach provides the set of seven categories that constitute religion in this second sense. These are the experiential, ritual, social, doctrinal, narrative, material, and ethical phenomenological dimensions.

Using Smart's framework, this study finds that consumerism is appropriately placed within the category of religion. There is an experiential dimension that provides opportunities for individuals to interact with consumerism both physically and emotionally. Like other religions, consumerism employs pilgrimages and initiation rites as part of its ritualistic dimension. It entails social roles for people to participate in that give consumerism its organizational structure. There are key doctrines that require acceptance and stories that concretize the beliefs and practices connected with it. Consumerism also expresses itself through a material dimension of holy places, artistry, and dress. Lastly, it has an ethic that governs people's values and conduct. Through each of these categories, consumerism exhibits the same delineational phenomena as other religions, which leads to the conclusion that it is justifiable to name consumerism a religion.

Having established that consumerism is a religion both as people's ultimate concern and in accordance with phenomenological criteria common to religions, attention is given to the ethic of consumerism. The ethic of consumerism is self-defined happiness through consuming. As chapter three demonstrates, this guiding principle affects how people understand and articulate ideas of personhood, society, and the environment. This moral perspective fosters practices of excess, privatization, and ecological denigration, without concern for the harm these actions cause.

In contrast to the ethic of consumerism, the Christian ethic of neighbor love is concerned with others. This virtue encourages attitudes of self-sacrifice, the dignity of life, and seeking the common good, largely because of Jesus's example. These convictions have the power to shape the way believers think about personhood, society, and the environment. And although Christians have not always lived out love toward their neighbors, it is the standard that governs the believer's life. As neighbor love emphasizes the other over one's self, it is clear that the ethics of consumerism and Christianity are in opposition.

Substantiating consumerism as a religion whose ethic is antithetical to neighbor love makes three important contributions. First, it establishes consumerism within a familiar religious nomenclature. When people discuss religion, they tie the new religious terminology to words and concepts they already know. Take for example, the correlation that frequently occurs between Islam and Christianity. The Qur'an is the Muslim Bible and a mosque is a church. The Imam equates to a Bishop and Ramadan means Lent. While this technique loses the nuance of how practitioners understand these religious terms, it allows outsiders to categorize these ideas with familiar concepts. As

consumerism does not use the word church or evangelist or pilgrimage, this study provides the religious terminology Western society understands to help people recognize that consumerism does meet a full definition of religion.

Another salient aspect of this work admits to the difficulty people will have resisting the religion of consumerism. This is because consumerism is not merely a religion, but it is *also* a religion. That is to say, consumerism has a place within the religious realm, but it extends into the economic and socio-psychological spheres also. Consequently, consumerism cannot be rejected simply based on its religious realm; its ubiquity has implications beyond one's theological beliefs. While people may refuse to identify themselves with the religion of consumerism, they will still need to contend with the ethic of consumerism that permeates the sociological and economic spheres. The prevalence of consumerism in all three realms has ramifications for those guided by the ethic of neighbor love. The Christian's response cannot simply be to reject or ignore consumerism and feign righteousness. She must be aware of her continued complicity in an antithetical system that confines her ability and opportunity to enact neighbor love.

Finally, naming consumerism a religion whose ethic is antithetical to that of Christianity gives scholars the justification they have hitherto presumed. Ethicists and theologians are not simply making an analogy or using hyperbole when they declare consumerism a religion. This work systematically establishes consumerism is a religion according to the dual meanings of the word. People's consumption is both their ultimate concern as well as being tied to a schema of religious phenomena.

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## VITA

Christopher Porter was born and raised in McDonald, Ohio. Before attending Loyola University Chicago, he attended Bowling Green State University where he earned a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology in 1994. He then attended Johnson University (formerly Johnson Bible College) where he graduated with another Bachelor of Arts in Biblical Studies and TESOL in 1997. From 1997 until 2005, he served as a campus minister at Iowa State University and the University of Northern Iowa. In 2005, Porter began his Master of Arts in Theology at Loyola University Chicago and went on to complete his Ph.D. there.

While at Loyola, Porter assisted with transcribing an upcoming work on Hindu practice in the United States and worked as a Graduate Research Assistant. He also won the Midwest Region of the American Academy of Religion's *Marion McFarland Taylor Award for Best Research Paper in the area of Religion, Ecology, and Sustainability* in 2013.

Currently, Porter is adjunct teaching Theology courses at Loyola University Chicago and ESL courses at the College of Lake County. He lives in Waukegan, Illinois.

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The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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